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Off-Beats and Cross Streets: A Collection of Writing about Music, Relationships, and New York City

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Off-Beats and Cross-Streets: A Collection of Writing about Music, Relationships, and
New York City

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN
MAINE, STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Tyler Scott Margid

2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

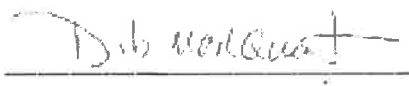
November 20, 2019

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Tyler Margid entitled *Off-Beats and Cross-Streets* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



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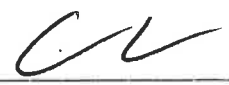
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Abstract

Through a series of concert reviews, album reviews, and personal essays, this thesis tracks a musical memoir about the transition from a childhood growing up in a sheltered Connecticut suburb to young adulthood working in New York City, discovering relationships and music scenes that shape the narrator's sense of identity as well the larger culture he finds himself in. The essays touch upon the development of personality in aspects that reveal the roots of the narrator's political views, his interest in sports, existential beliefs about free will and theoretical physics, the human condition in the 21st century, and his search for love and companionship. Behind these themes plays a soundtrack of music which the narrator uses to guide himself by, connecting his story to songs through deep analysis of the theory behind them. New York City presents itself as a world of opportunity as the narrator settles into adulthood. The ability to experience the live music scene and encounter a cast of individuals whose personalities announce themselves above the din of the crowd. The city also poses its own challenges with the daily grind, the messiness inherent in so many people existing in such proximity.

Acknowledgements

This collection of writing would not exist without the expert guidance of my mentors throughout the Stonecoast MFA program, Deb Marquart, T Fleischmann, and John Florio. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my family. Firstly, my parents, who have always been the first ones to support and encourage me; my grandparents Lorraine and Larry, who send their love in weekly doses over the phone and have always believed in me; my grandfather Ray Vondrak who inspired my passion for literature from a young age, and whom I miss terribly; and lastly, my girlfriend Jess, who has been my rock for the last and most trying semester of this program, and has put up with me in spite of my difficulties.

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underground music scene of New York, an ear for non-diatonic chord substitutions, and a strange compulsion to extrapolate on how these things reflect the larger human condition. When I started applying to MFA programs, I thought the workshops and faculty mentorship would be the best way to improve my writing. Three semesters later, I realize I've learned at least as much from the other students in the program. The residencies are the only time I get to be surrounded by people who are just as dedicated to the pursuit of craft writing as I am. The closest I get to that in my daily life is having a coworker asking me to proofread an email or a friend calling me a grammar Nazi when I point out that there's a difference between "less" and "fewer." The Harraseeket is like utopia in the sense that I could sit down to have lunch with anyone and discuss the merits and pitfalls of using a 2nd person point of view narration. It's those conversations outside of workshop that have given me the most perspective on how writers think and see the world. Every moment is a scene, and everything is a possible metaphor for something else (and when you're talking to a pop fic student, every thought is a window into a different reality).

In my first semester at Stonecoast, my advisor, Deb Marquart, suggested I read Jacques Attali's book, *Noise*. In it, he writes about how music often predicts greater movements in culture. The writing is dense, philosophical, and abstract exposition. There are long, tortured sentences that made me want to throw the book across the room and shout "What are you actually trying to say!" But when I sat down and mapped out each axiom one at a time, I realized this French economist makes some fascinating points about how music reflects and even precedes cultural movements. Furthermore, over three decades later, his theory still holds up. In many ways there is a case to be made that when

started working in New York. I went to open mic readings Monday nights at the Bowery Poetry Club, participated in generative “Write-ins” on Friday evenings at the Gotham Writers Workshop. But it was hard to connect with the busy New Yorkers for more than a couple weeks in a row. I knew I had to look elsewhere to find a new community of writers to join. Around that time I ran into Nikki Sambitsky, one of my friends from college, at a party in West Hartford. She was just finishing her MFA at Stonecoast and spoke glowingly of the program, the faculty, and most notably, the community she found there. The next day I started putting together my application.

I was a dummy when I first walked into the Harraseeket on a snowy afternoon a year and a half ago. I had no direction, no clear understanding of what I was doing or why I was there. I knew that writing is the only way to tame the chaos of my internal dialogue and make sense of the external society which I felt had no place for me. The only thing I knew for certain was that I like to write and I wanted to get better. “Write what?” someone smarter than that past version of myself might ask. Conventional wisdom tells us we should write what we know. Kind of a conundrum for a dummy with no special knowledge. I’m no physicist or anthropologist. I’m a relatively average guy who grew up in the suburbs of Connecticut. Holden Caulfield has already worn out his welcome in the cannon.

If I can’t write what I know, the next best thing I’ve found is to write what I’m passionate about. That’s where I found my niche of writing about music and culture. I have the privilege of being able to go to live music events around New York City and a love for poorly ventilated basement venues and bands that radio DJs don’t play. These are the experiences I have to offer when I sit down to write. My special knowledge is the

You don't win many friends as middle school student who likes writing poetry, so I practiced in the secret safety in a notebook labeled "Math." The disguise worked to keep away other students who would've made fun of me, and it had the extra benefit of pleasing my parents that I seemed to be studying even after I finished all my homework.

I found a public use for my poetry in high school when I started playing in bands. *Poetry* might be pretentious and unhip, but if you write *lyrics*, that was cool. I always loved music, and writing songs combined my two passions. Hearing my words leap off the page, amplified through a PA system and reverberate through local teen centers and music venues added a whole new kind of reward for the work I put into writing. It wasn't just about me and my private relationship with the worlds; it was a means to connect to other people.

I found my first real literary community in college. I took writing workshops in every genre and quickly made friends with the students who had a passion for the craft. The English department faculty sent us to conferences together to represent the school with readings and participate in workshops with other undergrads from around the country. It was a gift we didn't take lightly. There may have been some boozy open-mic nights and networking of a less-than professional nature. We were kids, after all. But we never once took these opportunities for granted. We applied everything we learned to our craft and felt doubly inspired to dedicate ourselves to writing.

Upon graduating from college, the real world came crashing down. Hard. I lost touch with many of my writing friends. I moved back home and was reduced to commenting on their social media posts, and only made occasional trips across the state to visit my closest friend from the time. I tried finding a similar community when I

Skull-shaking cadence of the J train rolls
The rhythm of defeat, repeating like a pulse
Marching on and static lyrics shout a retort
To the melody abandoned in the key of New York
-Parquet Courts “Captive of the Sun”

Preface

I enjoyed writing ever since I was a kid, keeping a notebook of invented worlds full of monsters and dungeons inspired by the video games I played. As I grew up, I found the real world complex and interesting enough, and my writing shifted to reflect events in my life. After I started following the Mets, I would write about each game. I wrote stories about my friends and the other kids I went to school with. Sometimes these stories were real things I wanted to remember; other times they'd be wish-fulfillment stories about hitting the game-winning home run for my little league baseball team, or going to the dance with the girl I had a crush on in class. In middle school, my seventh-grade English teacher was the first to show me the world of poetry, and how literature wasn't just for book reports about themes and character development. Books held essential truths about the world and how to live in it. There was more than just plot points to follow. How a writer states something is at least as important as what they are saying, and there are different levels of understanding a story. I didn't know anything about literary theory at the time, but this was my first taste for it. And it changed everything for me.

in the mid-1980s techno music started to replace studio musicians with ProTools and Midi recording software we saw a preview of the automation that would enable more robotic instruments to do the work of humans.

One night during my second residency I was invited to watch a movie with a group of other students. As we were watching it, we discussed how writers are like typographical directors. We are the ones deciding where to place the camera and dictating what the reader can “see”. It sounds obvious (and seems a terrible way to watch a movie) but I had never looked at it that way before when sitting down in front of a Word document. So much of the work of becoming a better writer is unlearning the bad habits of the kind of expository writing that had been beaten into us for 9 years of school. Nowhere in the five paragraph essay are you given space to build a scene between the bricks of main ideas and supporting evidence. It requires taking backward steps to understand what we are really doing on the page.

The college I went to had a generously funded student-run literary magazine that had a print run of over 5,000 issues each semester and sent the editors to AWP every year. It was amazing to meet each week and vote on which submissions we’d accept, discussing each one and debating if we want it to represent our publication. When I came to Stonecoast, Jess Flarity was one of the first students I met and he was the one who offered me the position of deputy managing editor of the Stone Coast Review my second semester. Working with the editors and reading through the submissions helped keep me connected to the Stonecoast community in the long stretch of months between semesters.

Because writing is such a solitary activity, the ten days at residency are the only times I get to be completely immersed in a social writing environment, and it’s a strange

place where time moves both fast and slow, days go by in flashes of presentations, workshops, seminars, readings, and replete. I often leave feeling inspired, sleep deprived, and a little light headed. It has been invaluable to have access to that community between residencies. I've swapped drafts with other students and discussed which books we're annotating. These people have kept me sane in the mad cycles of packets and revisions. They've encouraged me when I've questioned what I'm doing in this program and assured me that the imposter syndrome is common and the best treatment is to just keep writing. In the short time I've known them, these people have become my closest friends, and I know I will call on them even after our time at Stonecoast is done.

One of the biggest challenges I've found in my Stonecoast experience is overcoming the lack of personal narrative. Each workshop I'd submit a manuscript analyzing how listening to a particular indie album can shed light on quantum field theory, or throwing yourself into a mosh pit can be a simulacrum of a super-organism. Each time I get similar feedback: who the hell is this narrator? I struggle with writing about myself. It's not because I'm a reticent or private person. I just don't think I'm all that interesting. This is a problem in creative nonfiction, a genre dominated by memoir and personal essay (emphasis on the *personal*). My writing tends to be a form of CNF that falls into the cracks between memoir and journalism, and no one's really sure of what to make of it. I've gotten better at shifting it towards memoir writing. Different writers in each of the workshops I've been in at residency have pointed towards areas where the personal story can be strengthened, and that's helped me understand how to balance a strong sense of a narrator without losing the bigger picture of what the music represents in a particular essay.

My second semester. Working with T as a mentor, I was introduced to the collection of essays, *Let Me Clear My Throat* by Elena Passarello, who expertly writes the personal stories that spring from musical (usually vocal) origins. She writes about the specific mechanics behind sound, and it makes for a particularly loud reading. She goes into specifics about how sound travels through the instrument of the body and their reverberating effects on all who hear them. This is the kind of writing I aspire to achieve when I delve into the specific music theory that powers the songs in my own essays.

There's a funny moment when the music stops. The reverberations in your head echo with atrophying reverb of the last chord play. The catchy lyrics of the chorus replay with diminishing returns until drowned out by the oncoming rush of consciousness. Writing the music gives us the road maps back to those fleeting moments of feeling. It's a rough translation, of course, but as in any form of translation there's a give and take. What gets lost in the aural experience leaves room for the text to explore what that music reflects about the world it reverberates through. It's the physical arrangement of paragraphs that can bridge the gap between what goes into our ears and what goes through our minds.

Compiling this collection of essays has felt like a task of stitching together parts of my life that I've always compartmentalized into separate bits. Different, unconnected aspects of my identity. The music lover who tries to make sense of his emotions through expressions in harmonies and melodies; the young professional seeking elements of humanity in a fast-paced rat-race working for a media start-up; the guy with irrational love for sports teams and rationalized disillusion of political parties; the romantic looking for a person to love and share a life together. These different parts of me come out in

different life situations, and they often emerge as separate narrators in my writing.

Throughout the Stonecoast program, one of the recurring themes in the feedback I've gotten from various mentors and workshops is the idea that subjectivity is equally as important as the subject, and it's the writer's responsibility to convey a sense of who is on the other side of the pen. What are their motivations? Their obsessions? What special expertise might they be bringing to the subject or biases might be filtering their perspective. In the past two years as a student in the program, the constant refrain I've heard has been "we want to know more about the narrator." And right up to the last semester that notion seemed surprising to me. I'm not a particularly private person, but my goals as a writer have never started from a focus on revealing myself. My life and problems aren't particularly interesting or unique, and in this day and age the last thing we need is another straight, white, male who takes himself too seriously.

I used to think that ideas were the essence of stories. That's the perspective I had as a reader, mining narratives for what they might reveal about the human condition. As a writer, I've come to the realization that there isn't much space separating a person from the stories they have to tell. Ideas can't exist in a vacuum; they don't come spontaneously. We can only receive ideas as the distillate of lived experiences. I couldn't fully express my ideas without revealing all the personal background context by which I arrived at them. This collection of essays is my attempt to bleed together all those separate narrators to tell the full story behind the ideas I wish to convey.

I'm not a New Yorker, but I've always felt New York-adjacent. I work in the city during the week, spend many weekends there going to bars, concerts, sporting events. I sometimes stay in my cousin's third-floor walkup apartment in Harlem when she needs

someone to look after her cats, or I need a place to crash. But I've never resided within the five boroughs. I've lived an hour outside the city for most of my life, in the southwest corner of Connecticut, the hazy outline of Manhattan lights can be seen on a clear summer evening where the sun disappears across the Long Island Sound. The city has always loomed large in my mind as a place where life amplifies. There are more people to meet, more shows to see, more experiences to chase among the streets and avenues than any of the small towns and cities of Connecticut I've lived in. The city has a mystique to it in its transmutable, ever-changing nature. Despite being a city of steel and concrete, New York shifts and changes every day. The skyline is not a static landmark, and the signs in shop windows and restaurant entrances can seem as fluid as Etch-A-Sketch displays. But the streets of Manhattan have remained almost as constant as the island itself. Memories can't keep pace with the cranes and demolition crews, so everyone has their own personal version of New York in their heads. I look up Park Ave and see the MetLife building, but my parents who worked here in the 80s still see it as the Pan Am building. I went to my first rock show at Roseland Ballroom, which has since been converted into an office building.

Before writing became a passion of mine, I tried using music as the vessel of self-expression. It didn't work out. After being in various rock bands through high school, failing to get into a program to study jazz guitar as an undergrad, and finally being reduced to solo performances at open mics, playing music has become a private hobby for me. But music still remains an important part of my life, and it still has the power to connect people. I enjoy the practice of analyzing the structures and theory behind songs in the same way I examine and deconstruct the sentences and prose style of my favorite

writers. In this way, music and language are intimately related, despite their separate mediums. Both can be described by their rhythm and tone, and both have the power to expand our perception of the world. When standing on a crowded subway train, rattling downtown through dark tunnels, flanked by inane advertisements and breathing the stuffy atmosphere of various body odors, I can be transported from that present reality through the simple refuge of a book or headphones.

In writing, revising, curating these essays into a cohesive collection, I've had to face the task of inserting myself in the text as not just a narrator to testify to my thoughts and experiences. I've had to face myself as a character in the story of my life. There are parts of these essays which I'm embarrassed of, parts that hurt me to the point of tears as I put them to paper. I can't promise the stories are extraordinary or infused with drama. But they contain meditations on growing up in the 21st century, a life on the edge of one of the most crowded and isolating cities in the world. It's a search for human connection in a culture of impersonal individualism, and a restless pursuit of music in the deafening white noise of the city that never sleeps. This collection tells an incomplete story from the front lines of personal experience.

**Off-Beats and Cross-Streets: A Collection of Writing about Music, Relationships,
and New York City**

Sound Check

The lights go down, the chatter and house music too. The room becomes a vacuum of silence, darkness, and the anticipation that something is about to happen. The crowd titters, staring at the unlit stage. The mics are in place with levels all adjusted. Guitars are tuned and sit inert on black stands. The drum-stand atop the risers in back looks like a horizon at night. Small red lights on the towering amps indicate the tubes inside are warm and ready. This dark and quiet room is rife with the tension of potential waiting to burst forth. What comes next will be loud.

Sometimes, music concerts suck. Standing in the middle of hundreds of strangers sweating on you while you breathe in the same stale air and slowly go is not always fun. Don't even try to deny it; I don't. That's why I think I've lost my mind. My collection of ticket stubs and wristbands from various concerts has upgraded from a tissue-box to a shoebox. I have friends who like going to shows, but even they can't keep up. I'm starting to think they're the smart ones. They see me slouch into the office the next day running on three hours of sleep and black coffee, my ears still ringing, eyelids at half-mast. They may say their envious when I tell them how the band unleashed a relic from their debut album, or when the Grammy-winning rock band invited members from the pioneers of hardcore punk to play songs that no radio waves would carry. But these friends of mine, they know better.

I don't, and I'm okay with that. I'm probably more of a music junkie than music fan. I often feel the need to participate in the music. I started playing guitar before my fingers were long enough to stretch across four frets. I don't know how to dance, but know the ecstasy of music filling my body. Music is the context to bring people to a concert venue, the ultimate unifier. But it's not the only reason people like me keep coming back night after night. Something larger must be at work. When I'm standing in the middle of the floor, looking up at a band glowing in the ethereal, colorful stage lighting, feeling the crowd pulsate around me, feeling my bones rattle as they absorb the bass, everything swaddled in sonic harmony. Maybe I'm waxing a little hyperbolic here, but there's no other way to say this. I've experimented with psychedelic drugs and meditation, but nothing dissolves the ego and sense of self like these concerts. It feels like being a part of an expansive unity much larger than just the music, made ever more precious by its ephemeral nature.

I'm not a religious person, but the only time I've felt something close to this was in Jerusalem. Friday night strangers danced and sang together at the foot of the Western Wall. All different people coming together to celebrate the same thing. Some called it faith, others home, or freedom, or God, or love. If we peel back the messy semantics of language, we'd find the same essence beneath. Halfway around the world, I was feeling the same sensation I get on a typical Friday night show by local bands in my college town. It's true that you may not have much of an influence on how a concert goes, just being one member of the audience. But you're contributing to the energy of the whole venue.

So much of human suffering, I believe, stems from the relativity of expectations. You will never be disappointed so long as you don't expect too much. There will always be music. It won't always be good music, but it will never cause suffering. The worst music can be is mildly grating or irritating to listen to, a dull annoyance compared to much of the hardships everyone faces in day-to-day life. On the other end of the spectrum, music can resonate with sentiment that makes all the pain and dreary business of living fade into the background and amplify a sense of harmony. That's why concerts and live music are so vital to our culture, because between the opening song and the encore, we enter that state of bliss and share it with everyone in the venue.

The Art of Caring About Nothing

My heart broke for the first time in October 2000. I was a blissful idiot back then. Eight years old, and all I knew about love I learned from Disney movies and my happily married parents. I had fallen in love that year and had all the faith in the world that it would go the distance. In my mind, it couldn't go any other way. The world was a kind, soft place then with only happy endings. I never heard of the word "tragedy," and life was simple. Before school each morning, I'd write in a little blue journal about my beloved—the 2000 New York Mets. It was the first season I seriously followed the team. I knew all the players on the roster, tracked their stats, and idolized them as heroes. My dad took me to Shea Stadium for some games on the weekends. I felt a sacred air around the old, blue stadium with the neon stick figures catching fly balls and swinging bats. The first time we walked out into the stands, I remember the shock of sunshine, the smell of hot dogs the warm air of a June afternoon in Queens, looking down on the pristine baseball diamond. I didn't grow up religious but Shea felt like a temple to me, perhaps because that's where I've done the most praying. Personally, I'm on the more skeptical side of agnostic and even still have more faith in a God than the Mets bullpen most seasons.

The team mattered to me because baseball mattered, in a kind of tautology that foregoes logic. The easy explanation is that's just how I was raised. My father sang "Meet the Mets" to my sister and me as a lullaby when we were in the crib. Trying to think back on how I got caught up in this particular fandom, I can go as far into the past as one of my first memories. Must have been around 1997, age five the first time I saw

my dad watching a Mets game on TV. He told me “son, we root for the guys in the white shirts with blue stripes.” From that moment on I was doomed for a lifetime of disappointment. But I didn’t know it at the time, certainly not in 2000, and even twenty years later, every fall I say “there’s always next season.” To trace this cursed fandom even further, father’s father grew up a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. After that franchise went west in 1958, their refugee fans in New York, my grandfather among them, flocked to the Mets four years later when they moved into the league.

Maybe it’s me, but I swear the dog I grew up with was a sports fan. She always sat curled up by my dad’s feet as we watched Mets games on TV, gnawing methodically on a bone or chew-toy. The drone of MLB rambling commentators could lull her sleep within three outs. Her problem was that her naps were frequently interrupted by my dad’s fanatic screams at the glowing box opposite the couch. He would erupt with full-throated cheers, yelling “go, go, go” to the runners rounding the bases. Other times he’d scream curses at “blind” umpires or flat-footed center fielders that could be heard from the backyard. This would always catch the poor puppy unexpected as she’d jolt and scatter into the next room. When I was a little kid, I also found these outbursts frightening and unpredictable. But as I started to watch more games with him, and he’d explain things like the infield fly and ground rule double, and generally why these guys are running and throwing the ball around. Without an understanding of these rules, the spectacle of a baseball game makes literally no sense, and the purpose of the whole ordeal is entirely arbitrary. Gradually, the dog too began to understand that my dad wasn’t angry at anyone in the house but was just excited about something to do with the bright, colorful box in the room. She no longer ran scared when he yelled during baseball games. She jumped up

with him and started barking at the television until the next batter stepped into the box and they'd both sit down again. In this way my dad trained both me and the dog to be Mets fans for life.

If free will really does exist in the sense of "free to act; free to fall," sure, I could have chosen to root for the other New York team and become a Yankee fan. It would have saved me a lot of heartache and brought me more joy through the years. But there's a non-zero chance that I would have been kicked out of the house had I ever cheered for the Yankees. My dad would tell me that Met fans have more heart than Yankee fans because we suffer more losses. That kind of excuse made it easier for every time we had to walk down those concrete steps after an evening spent watching the team blow another game. It was hard not to feel like losers, especially going to school the next day having to face the Yankee fans in class.

The Mets lost the World Series in 2000 to the Yankees, winning only one of five games. I came into school on Friday, October 27th with tears streaming down my face. My classmates didn't talk to me. I pulled out my little blue journal and wrote the shortest entry in it, "The Mets lose." I probably meant to use past tense, that the Mets lost last night and lost the series, but maybe this was more accurate. I never wrote in that journal again, and though I still kept on rooting for the Mets, I would never let myself believe in them like I did that year.

My mother worked in the same school district when I was in primary school, and for a while she would drive us both to school in the mornings. Every time we'd listen to NPR's *Morning Edition* radio news show. Both her parents were working class immigrants, and

she shared her father's passion for liberal values. In his retirement, he walked half a mile to the family owned grocery store to buy the *Times* every morning. When my dad suggested one day that he could get it delivered to his door, he responded, "I'd rather use my money to support the little guy." I asked my mother between NPR stories on one of our many morning drives to school what it means to be a Democrat or Republican. She told me "Democrats believe the government should work to help the people; Republicans believe people have to help themselves and the government should intervene in their lives as little as possible." It was a bit of a reductive answer but I was a simple child, unable to comprehend the complete history of political ideology. To my mind, rivals just wore different shirts. To be fair, even today these labels still strike me as arbitrary and convoluted.

The small town I grew up in was rather conservative for a blue state, and a lot of my friends shared their parents' right-wing sensitivities. I was in sixth grade during the 2004 elections and I told my friend Trent I hoped John Kerry would win. He said "then that makes you gay, because John Kerry wants gay people to get married."

My mother hated George Bush for taking the country to war. Too young to read the news and really understand politics, I hated him too because at least I knew that war was bad. In the first few years of the Iraq war, driving around town, you'd see a few houses in the town that had flags with a red border and a gold star in the middle outlined in blue hanging in the front yard. I didn't notice the flags until my mom pointed them out to me and explained that family lost someone in the war.

I watched the presidential debates on TV with my parents as we all rooted for Kerry. I didn't understand what they were talking about most of the time with Medicare

or tax laws. I understood the election between Bush and Kerry as the president who took this country to war against the man who would save families from hanging gold star flags. Young people were dying overseas. The climate was in peril.

I believed Kerry would win. All I heard from my parents was that people wanted Bush out. Driving around town, you'd see cars with yellow ribbon bumper stickers saying "Support Our Troops." I thought that meant help them to come home. I was still too naive to realize it meant support the cause that kept them at war.

It wasn't sadness I felt when Bush won the election. He didn't win it like a game of baseball because the rules were more arbitrary than safe or out. He didn't have the better team. He didn't get more votes. I didn't understand how this was happening. I still thought electoral colleges were actual schools. My teachers had claimed that America is the standard-bearer of democracy, so I figured the adults in charge must know what they're doing.

But even at my young age, even though I didn't understand politics, one thought kept nagging at me: These issues seemed so much more important than a World Series.

Before I tasted the bitter cynicism of adolescent angst and existential panic, I was one of the jocks. I played a variety of sports. I wasn't the best at any of these sports, but I could run fast and pitched a good left-handed curveball. I also loved competing and the notion of using every ounce of athletic skill, awareness, and creativity and seeing how your best measures up to your opposition's best. Victory tasted like romantic ecstasy; defeat carried bitter determination to choke down the humiliation and push yourself further next time. I never hung out much with my teammates outside of practice and games though. A few of

the guys seemed like jerks to me--the type who always needed the last word but never really had anything to say--but most of them were good dudes, easy to get along with. I gave up all the sports when they started interfering with spending time with my friends after school and on weekends.

I stopped watching Mets games, stopped caring about the team that hurt so much to root for. Taking a logical perspective, it seemed masochistic to invest so much emotional stock into a team that paid dividends in heartache. I was going through adolescence and my emotions didn't need any extra encouragement or supplement to overreact.

Somewhere between middle school and high school years, sports and athleticism started to seem vapid and uncool. Even though the jocks in my grade hosted the "cooler" parties and dated the "hotter chicks," I preferred hanging out with the kids who smoked in the parking lot and listened to Modest Mouse. They appealed to me as more interesting, with conversations ranging from how the world had become so fucked to the best strategies for surviving the zombie apocalypse. Sports didn't matter to them, and so they stopped mattering to me.

I started listening to bands like Dead Kennedys, The Clash, Rage Against the Machine, and Anti-Flag, and adopted political views that went even further left than my parents. My father was moderately left of center, while my mother was more pragmatic than ideological about her liberalism. I was starting to understand the corruption of the military/industrial complex and politicians who catered to the interests of corporate donors over constituents. It made me angry at a nation that seemed so profoundly unfair, and the instruments for fairness were exploited to make it more unjust. I enjoyed having political discussions with my friends, even the staunch Republicans. I had many

arguments with my friend Kaitlin, whose father was a chairman of the Republican Town Committee. She identified as a “Goldwater conservative.” We both agreed on social liberties and opposed the various foreign wars, but argued constantly when it came to the government helping marginalized demographics with a social safety net--entitlements, as she called it. We had some passionate debates in 2010 when the Obama administration passed the ACA healthcare bill. And when we ran from a cop because we were smoking pot in a park after sunset she said that was just “taxpayer money doing its most important job.” I called her Ayn Rand, but she probably took that as a compliment.

The one sport that did still matter to me was soccer. My family moved to London for a couple of years when I was 8-10 years old. My dad told me to root for Arsenal, so I became an Arsenal fan. It was the late 90s, and they were the biggest club in London. The passion of supporters was infectious with their banner-waving and marching in the streets outside Highbury Stadium. The way they sang and chanted throughout the entire match made the atmosphere at Shea Stadium seem like a library. It was difficult to follow the English premier league when we moved back to America because I didn't know any other soccer fans, but I hosted parties to watch the World Cup in 2010. In my opinion, no other sport parallels the passion of soccer fans, the closest analogue in American sports is probably college football. The noise and atmosphere of the matches felt palpable from just watching them on TV, the way the fans would sing for the entire 90 minutes, the plumes of fire and smoke from flares ignited in the stands. Soccer encompassed the widest range of human emotion. I heard about hooligans from when I lived in London, the fans that would start fights and vandalize the grounds outside stadiums. I also saw

players exchanging shirts with the opposite team after the final whistle. But overall, I found it to be the most beautiful sport to watch--the way players control the ball, juggling, passing it behind their backs with a heel, bending shots that rocket into the net. The action on the pitch moves like fluid poetry, nonstop for two 45-minute halves.

Soccer truly is the world's sport, and perhaps part of my attraction to it come from the fact that it is one of the few major sports that isn't dominated by the US. Our national team are real underdogs when on the World Cup stage, and that feels refreshing and humbling in a healthy way. But it's a lonely fandom for an American who supports a soccer club even after 2013 when NBC purchased the rights to broadcast the English premier league in America. Most of the matches aired in the mornings while most of my college friends were still sleeping, but even during the one that were on later in the day, they just appeased me and watched casually while I intermittently screamed at the TV (the way my father taught me).

I lost faith and interest in politics in the run-up to the 2016 election. I supported Bernie Sanders' campaign by canvassing in New York and phone banking in Connecticut. When the DNC party undermined him and rigged the Democratic primary process that was the final straw. I realized how stretched thin and warped the definition of democracy had to be to accurately describe America, and the term "representative democracy" seemed even more of a joke because voting is the most insipid means for an interest to get representation in Washington. Donations are the primary means of political influence, and that is very unlikely to change.

By November, keeping up with politics was more of a chore than an interest to stay informed about the news from Washington. None of the candidates represented what I thought were democratic values. Hillary Clinton sounded like a moderate, pro-war Republican and corporate Democrat who paid lip service to the trending social issues and identity politics. Trump seemed like buffoon villain from some 80s movie and revealed the debates as the inane television spectacles they've become.

All political discourse seemed like two sides talking past each other. Hoping for a rational debate, I reconnected with Kaitlin, who was going for her PhD in political science at UNC. But I found it hard to have a reasonable discussion about what was going on the way we used to. I told her I found the state of the country more disturbing than ever. The polarizing effect of the two-party system, and the ensuing anger and resentment between the two groups terrified me. I said "There seems to be no space for people to have meaningful debates about what to do about our shared future."

She said, "That's because the left opposes free speech."

"I'm not sure that's true. Hard to believe anyone opposes the first amendment."

"But they do. On college campuses they protest any speakers who come with views they don't agree with," she said.

"That's just a few kids in isolated instances. It seems unfair to say that the entire left agrees with their actions."

"You can call them isolated instances, but it looks to me more like a growing trend. A lot of liberals these days look at only the facts they agree with and use them to deny the larger truth to reality. You used to say that Republicans were science deniers,

now liberals are the ones ignoring basic facts of biology, like the fact that there are two genders with real biological differences.”

I said, “I don’t know all the facts surrounding trans rights, but you really can’t compare someone’s right to use which bathroom they feel more comfortable in to the global crisis of climate change.”

“Tyler, you *know* the facts. We were in the same biology class,” she said, and at that point I realized the conversation wasn’t going anywhere productive. *Facts* are irrelevant when we can’t even agree on what *matters*. It seemed like we were playing a game in which the rules were undefined. One team thinks they won because they got more hits; one team thinks they won because they got more strikeouts. No one is keeping track of how many people cross home plate.

New York finally got an MLS team in 2015, and that gave me an excuse to care about the oft-dismissed league of American professional soccer. They were the only sports team I came to support by my own decision, and that decision was made based only because they play in New York. They play in Yankee Stadium, in fact. The striking irony is I now have season tickets to the home of the team I’ve resented all my life. But it’s worth it because I’ve finally found a group of friends to watch the beautiful game with me. I love New York City Football Club, but I recognize it as an arbitrary love. I hate their rivals, the Red Bulls, but I also recognize that’s an arbitrary hate. Like the Mets, my team routinely gives me hope and breaks my heart, and I’m okay with it. There are no lives or human rights at stake when I’m standing and singing in the stands. Whoever holds the MLS Cup at the end of the season doesn’t (really) matter. We can analyze tactics from

formation to team selection, talk statistics all we want. All that (really) matters is standing with my friends and fellow New Yorkers as we sing and chant for our club together. Those Saturday afternoons, from spring to fall, for 90 minutes at a time, we can all be a part of something bigger than ourselves while forgetting the world and its problems we are powerless to affect.

The Black Parade

Write it off as an awkward phase when on the turn of the new millennium rock music became very self-conscious. The Sasquatch grunge rockers traded denim for leather. They cut their hair, then straightened it, then dyed it three different colors and started wearing eye makeup. They called it emo music for the mood-swing quality of the lyrics. It was a time of resurgence for romantic emotional honesty that died in the late 80s when it was supplanted by the irreverence and irony of bands like Pavement and The Meat Puppets, who wrote apathetic songs about getting high and disengaging from an absurd society. Emo music brought back all the feelings of the previous era and combined them with an acute sense of pain that the world is a cruel place to live. It brought with it all the overproduction of romantic pop music from the 80s and 90s--the echoed last lines of each verse, the neatly trimmed measures that played mechanically to the beat. It was a movement that gave teenagers a soundtrack to their angsty years of growing up.

I grew up in a postcard. Looking at the glossy surface of Wilton Connecticut, one sees a small town clinging to its colonial roots in the woods of New England. There remains a one-room schoolhouse preserved as a historic site visited by second graders on a field trip to experience how much of a pain it must have been to write with feather pens and leave with a new appreciation for their #2 pencils. Just like a postcard, the town is static and picturesque on the surface. The abundant forests and overgrown fields that used to be colonial farmland attract landscape painters and autumn "leafers" to bask in the vintage Americana. Not much changes, and on the surface, not much happens. The public schools

are well funded through high property taxes, with laudable graduation rates. The town is proud of their modest local celebrities: they dedicated a room in the public library to jazz legend Dave Brubeck; they named the Astro-turf high school field after international women's soccer star Kristine Lilly. It was the suburban American dream, a town so safe it was lethal.

Safe to say that My Chemical Romance was one of the most iconic emo bands of the early 2000s. They broke into the mainstream rock scene in 2004 with their second studio album *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge* featuring the single "I'm Not Okay (I Promise)" which was the biggest anthem of self-deprecation since Radiohead's "Creep." But their most successful album was their follow up in 2006 when they released *The Black Parade*. It's a concept album about a guy dying of cancer and coming to terms with regrets he has for the way he lived his life. For the album, MCR rebranded themselves with a world tour renaming the band The Black Parade. Front man and lead singer Gerard Way cut his hair short and bleached it and the whole band dressed in all black marching band outfits in a gothic homage to Sgt Pepper's Lonely-Hearts Club Band.

MCR ironically titled the first track of the album "The End." which uses heart monitor beeps to count off. The first verse addresses the audience directly as Way sings over a strumming 12-string acoustic and tells us "come one, come all to this tragic affair...you've got front row seats to the penitence ball" The whole production of the album is over the top, and the theatrical nature of this opening song sets the tone well. Way sings with a breathless sharpness that sounds reminiscent of early Bowie. The song transitions when he goes from singing to screaming "when I grow up, I want to be

nothing at all!” The drums enter like artillery, guitars go electric and fire power chords up and down a partial G major scale. The track blends into the next one with the return of the heart monitor, now flat-lining. Right from this opening there are clear influences showing from the previous generation of rock. “The End.” follows the same structure of Pink Floyd’s “In the Flesh?”, the first song off their rock opera, *The Wall*. The G major/E minor progression are the same two chords we hear first in David Bowie’s *Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust*. MCR takes these influences of the previous generation but twists all the glam into goth.

I am part of the first generation to grow up with social media. I never had a Myspace page, but when I began my freshman year at Wilton High, Facebook had recently trickled down from exclusively college users. My friends were all abandoning their AOL Instant Messaging usernames and making Facebook profiles. We used Facebook events to invite people to house parties, changed our “status” to different song lyrics, and wrote inside jokes on each other’s “wall” (now called a timeline). It was also ground zero of cyber bullying. The girls in my school were the cruelest to each other, posting unflattering pictures of their “friends” and spreading rumors at hypertext speeds. My sister, two grades ahead of me was a repeat victim of cyberbullying. She googled herself once and found a blog post from a guy in her class with the title “I Hate Courtney Margid.” The genius author thought no one would be able to trace it back to him if he just misspelled his name. She had a class with him and said he was “kinda flirty” with her. When it didn’t lead to anything, he took to the internet to call her “fat, ugly and dumb.” In junior year, a boy in my grade wrote out a very specific piece of erotic fiction about a very

specific girl in the same grade that somehow ended up on Facebook. Guys would quote it at him in the hallways, "Eight whole inches." He remained single for the rest of high school.

The album's track "How I Disappear" taps into MCR's emo roots. In his dying days, the patient reaches out to a long-lost loved one. Love becomes a major theme of this album, and in this context, it is how we think about the love we leave behind after our death.

Once we're dead, it's our loved ones who remember us and keep our memory alive.

Without anyone to love him, the patient will disappear upon his death. Towards the end of the song, there's a breakdown and the guitar goes from choppy sixteenth note chords to a powerful quarter note progression that uses all the darkness of the drop-D tuning. A strong reverb effect is used on Way's vocals as he screams, "And now/ You wanna see how far down/ I can sink/ Let me go/ Fuck!" The patient is pushing away those he loves and destroying his own life in the process.

Like a lot of things in my life, I started listening to emo music because of a girl. Haley was my first serious girlfriend. Before we started going out, I would buy albums by the bands on the t-shirts she wore to school and talk to her about them at lunch. That relationship that lasted almost a year and a half and got me through the worst of Wilton High, which is to say, most of my freshman and sophomore years. We fell in love the only way fourteen-year-olds know how--hard and reckless. We both struggled with depression and self-harm. We helped each other in our own toxic way. I knew if she found new scars on my body, she would then cut herself, and knowing that forced me to

put away my knife for a while. We shared some great times and were passionate about each other. We saw MCR together at Madison Square Garden while they on their Black Parade tour. Standing the entire show at our seats in the back, we shouted the lyrics along with the other 20 thousand teenagers dressed in black. The band in their black uniforms looked so small on that big stage across the arena. Gerard Way sounded breathless and raw in concert and lacked the cutting tone from the polished studio version I was used to. His face lit up on the big screen glistened with sweat through the pale makeup. But a relationship that burned with that much passion eventually burned itself out. I started resenting her on bad nights when I had the urge to cut myself and felt like I didn't have the rights to do what I want with my own body. I couldn't hold myself back and when she started cutting herself because of me it was more than I could take.

The album takes a dark turn in the fourth track "The Sharpest Lives." In this song, the patient is on death's doorstep, looking for something to take the pain away and looking for someone to remember him. He dulls his pain though drinking and being an asshole. Way sings, "I've really been on a bender and it shows/ So why don't you blow me/ A kiss before she goes." Love and self-loathing get even more because in addition to all the lyrical references to drugs and alcohol, the second verse there's an allusion to *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragic play that epitomizes love and death. Way sings, "Juliet loves the beast and the lust it commands/ Drop the dagger and lather the blood on your hands, Romeo." The patient is panicking being so close to the end, he'll take whatever vice he can obtain to numb himself, whether it comes through sexual or chemical means.

Drug use was rampant in Wilton high and kids took whatever vice available to them. There were a couple times my friends and I couldn't find pot and resorted to smoking "spice," which was a chemical mashup that no one really knew what it contained or what its effects were. It got you high, but it also felt like dying a little bit each time you smoked it. To make a few extra dollars and smoke pot for free, I started selling it junior and senior year of high school. I met my dealer's dealer and bought an ounce from him. I just sold to my friends at first, but once you're known for that kind of service, your phone starts blowing up with texts from unknown numbers asking "are you good?" After a while I started buying in greater bulk and sold in higher weights to other kids who dealt in the neighboring towns and prep schools.

When word got around that I was a guy who could serve pot, people started asking for other stuff. I got requests for heroin, coke, all kinds of pills--stuff I would never touch, for my safety as much as theirs. I stopped dealing the day I left Wilton and started college. But a couple of my friends who never got out of that town or moved back after college became statistics in the ever-expanding opiate epidemic gripping the nation. Their bodies are now and forever buried in that town.

Buried in the middle of the album is MCR's most iconic single, "Welcome to The Black Parade." The song shows off one of MCR's more theatrical influences, Queen's *A Night at the Opera*. Some have even called it the "Bohemian Rhapsody" of the emo generation. To that point, it is very singable and most people who were teenagers in the early 2000s know the lyrics. The song swells from a single piano tinkering down a G major arpeggio to a full on emo anthem in the end with a full marching band sound that would make John

Philip Sousa proud and Way definitely singing “Do or die/ You’ll never make me/ Because this world/ Will never take my heart/ You can try/ You’ll never break me.” In addition to being the album’s centerpiece musically, it’s also the lyrical crux of the album. In the album’s commentary, Way explains “I always like to believe that death comes for you however you want subconsciously, and maybe it’s a manifestation of a strong memory. So for this character, the patient, who’s dying tragically young in his 30’s is in the hospital, his strongest memory is of his father taking him to see this parade in the big city when he was a little boy. So that’s why death comes for him in this form of this black parade.” Though the black parade is a metaphor for death, it also provides a point of optimism. It ensures that he won’t disappear. His memory will “carry on.” In this way, “Welcome to the Black Parade” encapsulates the entire album.

I was never fated to be a rock star, so I tried to learn how to play jazz. Though most of high school, I thought I would get out of Wilton by going to study music. It was the only thing I was passionate about that one could get a bachelor’s degree in. I love all the fat sounding chords and the on-the-spot chaos of improvising. I played in the high school jazz band, but got frustrated by having to play in such a large group. With 30 teenagers playing horns at once, at least 2 of them will screw it up and ruin the whole song. I preferred playing with a smaller combo up near Purchase NY. We called ourselves Eyes of Autumn, and found the occasional gig at cafes in the city or Westchester. But my playing hit a plateau and I became discouraged. I was never going to get out of Wilton playing guitar and had to find another way. My friend Chet was able to though. He was

much better than me at guitar and taught me sweep picking patterns I still practice today. He was four grades ahead of me and left Wilton to study music production in Boston. Getting out of Wilton was our goal, and Chet made it—but he didn't get far. The winter after graduating, he hanged himself in his apartment in Brookline MA.

In the eighth track, "Cancer" we see the patient leaving this life. The energy and tempo of the album slows way down in the song. The patient continues to reflect on his life and his death. Gerard Way's vocals have a weird chorus effect on this short, pared down track. It sounds muddy and unclear, which is surprising for a song so simple and bare. But it also sounds a bit sickly, which is a fitting voice for the character of the patient, who is now in his death throes dying of cancer. The accompaniment of the solitary piano playing in a steady 4/4, chords that sound like measured breaths. In the album notes, Way says "this is the darkest song I've ever written." The lyrics are devastating in their honesty and real description of what it's like to die of this terrible disease. In the second verse he sings, "turn away/ 'Cause I'm awful just to see/ 'Cause all my hair's abandoned all my body/ All my agony/ Know that I will never marry/ Baby I'm just soggy from the chemo/ But counting down the days to go/ And just stay living."

It's hard to imagine someone else's struggle to stay living, and it's impossible to guess at that struggle when that person can't communicate. I met Laura at a summer camp in the mountains of Pennsylvania. She came with her younger sister on vacation from Germany. She had dark hair, green eyes, and a thick accent. We were in a band together at camp. She sang and played piano, and we played covers of "Californication" and The

Cranberries' "Zombie." We dated in one of those camp relationships that usually doesn't mean much, but this felt different. When she left at the end of the summer, I met her before she got on the shuttle bus with the other campers going to the airport. She handed me a hoodie she borrowed and we hugged until the counselors made her get on the bus. I watched until the bus disappeared around a corner at the bottom of the mountain. I put the hoodie on because it was still warm from her body and found a note in the pocket that ended by saying "I love you." We kept in touch through email, but after a while letters from Germany stopped appearing in my inbox. I moved on, got together with Haley, made and lost friends, passed and failed classes. In the winter of my senior year I got an email from Laura's sister. Laura had issues with frequent seizures, which I'd known about. She was on medication that helped prevent them. Her sister said they changed the medication and must have messed up the dosage because she started having seizures again, one of them so bad that the doctors had to induce a coma from which they were unable to wake her. She slipped from life, simple as falling asleep.

"Sleep is the tenth track of the album, and it describes a state of dissociated apathy. It starts with a looped recording of the patient saying "They're these terrors, and it feels like somebody was gripping my throat, squeezing. They're not like tremors, they're worse than tremors. They're like these terrors." The patient is crossing the line, leaving life behind and embracing death. In the lyrics, he's addressing the love he's leaving behind confessing "the awful things [he's] done" in his life and saying, "Through it all/ how could you cry for me/ 'Cause I don't feel bad about it/ So shut your eyes/ Kiss me goodbye/ And sleep." He's realizing it is too late to change or make amends. He is

doomed for hell, and there is nothing he can do to save himself. The only thing left is to make clear that he has no regrets and is “undeserving of [her] sympathy.” The song is in C major, but it borrows an A flat from the parallel minor, which reflects the transitioning state of the patient who is between two worlds, or two keys.

The key to living with insomnia is having people to talk to at all hours. The worst part of irregular sleep schedules is not the incessant feeling of never feeling fully awake during the day. It’s the long, dark hours where there’s no escape from consciousness. Luckily for me, my friend Chris who lived down the street also had sleep problems. So at night, after our parents had gone to bed, we would sneak out and meet up under the streetlight at the intersection of Thunder Lake Rd and Granite Dr. We’d talk about religion (I was admittedly atheist, he was attending a Jesuit school), or philosophize about the future. We’d walk half a mile down to Weir Farm, a nature preserve that used to belong to an artist, then donated to the National Park Conservation Association. The crisp air of 12-3 AM made us just as high as the pot smoke filling our lungs. In the field between the trees, we’d look up at the stars and listen to the owls lurking in the forest around us. Having Chris with me those nights, when usually I’d be alone in my room with only my books as a weak line of defense against my thoughts. He never knew it, but I can’t count how many times he stopped me from cutting myself.

No one is left to save the patient at this time as he finds himself in hell for the song “Mama.” This is one of the stand-out tracks of the album, starting with the crazed polka rhythm as the guitar fades in with an E major chord that alternates the bass note down a

perfect 4th to A. Gunshots and mortar fire can be heard in the background. The narrator reveals his past as a soldier of war, during which he did things that put him on this path to hell, as Way sings, "She said, you ain't no son of mine/ For what you've done they're/ Gonna find a place for you." We're introduced to another major character in this rock opera known as Mother War (whose vocal parts are sung by Liza Minnelli). She marches in the black parade and is a representation of the patient's fractured relationship with his own mother. She also stands in as a metaphor for the darkness and ills of society.

Wilton was a society of helicopter parents. The soccer and baseball games I played as a never had any meaning to them since we all got the same participation trophies at the end of the season, so we learned quickly that winning or losing meant nothing more than bragging rights, which also didn't matter much because the players on the losing teams often didn't care enough to let it bother them. We kids all saw the meaninglessness of our weekend activities seep into the weekdays of our parents too. My mom was a much more constant presence throughout childhood. As a school teacher in the same district, our schedules ran parallel, even though she didn't get home until a few hours after the bus dropped me off.

My father worked for over 30 years at a job that wore him down. He'd leave before my sister and I woke up, and was often not home until after our bedtime. He paid not only his time, but his happiness and some of his weekends for a job that allowed us to live in comfort in a town like Wilton. One day, I was in second grade, I resolved to stay up until I heard my dad come home. Earlier in school, I made a mask in art class out of tin and straw. The teacher complimented it, even used it as an example for the whole

class. I brought it home with me to show my father what I can make. When I heard his heavy footsteps creaking up the stairs, I swung my door open. "Dad," I said. "Check out this mask I made today in art class. I think I want to be an artist when I grow up." He looked at the strange, crookedly smiling tin face I handed him and smiled at me. "Hey, T, that's pretty neat," he said. "But you know, most artists--even the ones with the most talent--died penniless."

In the song, "Teenagers," the patient reflects on how society made him to be a frustrated, angry person. The overall tone comes off as both defensive and defiant. The patient, though he acknowledges he has made mistakes and hasn't been the best person, he refuses to take full blame for who he has become. He faults a vague and authoritative "them" who have an Orwellian control over his life, and use that power to make him miserable, and the only way he can preserve a sense of himself is through acts of rebellion and violence. The patient states this in the form of an ominous threat in the second verse when he says "But if you're troubled and hurt/ What you've got under your shirt/ Will make them pay for the things that they did." The song is in E major, and Gerard Way sings with a forced staccato, that sounds like an aural sneer. This combined with the darkness of the lyrics carries a profoundly disturbed effect. You can almost hear him straining against the false happy tone of the major chords he's made to harmonize with.

Most Wilton High School students strain to find harmony in a town run by adults who only understand it on a conceptual level: high graduation rates and property taxes means

we take care of young people here. When my parents discovered I was cutting myself they made me meet with the school's social worker, Mrs. Dunaj. It turned out she was the only adult who really understood the dark effect the town had on the children. She told me she moved to the district from a public school in the Bronx. There she met with kids who brought knives to school, kids who were beaten up on and off school grounds. But in her experience there, she told me she never encountered students as troubled and disturbed as Wilton students. Before moving to Wilton, she never had students who committed suicide or self-harm. She saw how emotionally repressed we all were in that school, and the insidious effect of having no one but yourself to turn against. The kind of pressure to perform and act a certain way was something I spoke with my friends about on a few occasions, but to hear it from an adult, let alone one that worked for the school, had a dramatic effect on me. She helped me to remember that life is so much more than Wilton Connecticut. Even though we were privileged to live in that town and attend that school, it came with a very steep personal cost. She told me the best thing to do is try focusing on finding a way to get out of that town and create a life worth living.

In the last track, the patient discovers an inner strength to try and save his life. The song "Famous Last Words" conveys a final hope that it's not too late to change. The patient can return to the living. It features a defiant chorus "I am not afraid to keep on living/ I am not afraid to walk this world alone/ Honey if you stay you'll be forgiven/ Nothing you can say can stop me coming home." As the patient faces death, he realizes life is treacherous, but it's worth living.

It's been 8 years since I graduated from Wilton, and I still get eerie feelings on the rare occasions I drive through it on rt. 7. The high school still looks the same, brown, windowless. The houses still separated from the road by long driveways, lurking behind lined trees parallel as prison bars. Life after Wilton has come with new challenges, misfortunes, and hardships. But never again have I felt that suffocating divide between what I felt and what I was expected to feel. Life had a new sense of honesty, and when bad things happen, I could act honestly and not have to pretend they didn't exist or that I should have to appear happy all the time.

I recently went to a bar in Brooklyn that was hosting an emo night party. People in their 20s and 30s dressed like teenagers in black band T-shirts and heavy eye makeup. At some point during the night, the DJ played "Welcome to the Black Parade." There were shrieks of joy as the famous descending piano melody played over the PA system. Hearing the song took me back to my childhood bedroom, listening to that album on my stereo and pretending I was somewhere else. And here I was, out of Wilton, surrounded by people who appreciate the same music all, "awake and unafraid," together unapologetically defiant but fragile.

There's a hidden track at the end of the album called "Blood." It's a short coda, about a minute and a half long, and gives the record a nice sense of closure. It sounds like a recording of a recording, or the producer somehow degraded the quality in the studio to make it sound older, as if it's the song is played on a gramophone. A piano plays a ragtime style harmony as Way sings "I gave you blood, blood, gallons of the stuff/ I gave you more than you could drink and it would never be enough." The song describes the

relationship between The Patient and hospital staff. The doctors and nurses are ostensibly there to treat him, but the lyrics are all about how he tries to appease and appeal to them.

My parents moved to Wilton to give my sister and me a better life and education. When we went to school in the city, boys were pulling down my sister's pants. I was getting my lunch money stolen and growing thinner. My mom and dad thought we'd be safer in the suburbs, and they were right. But suburban parents are often blind to the issues their children face until it's tragically too late. I have a lot to be grateful for growing up in a town like Wilton. At the same time, there was a lot of pressure to act in a certain way, to perform in a certain way. Living in a small town where everyone knows everyone else's business takes a toll on kids that slips beneath the surface of well-manicured lawns and is forced deeper than finished basements. It demands a thick skin and tolerance for scrutiny, and there are no AP or SAT prep courses to learn that kind of thing.

Some lessons of coping I learned from listening to bands like My Chemical Romance. Ever since the 50s, rock music has been a big part of the soundtrack of going through adolescence for any generation. It's not for me to say if parents are getting any better at raising teens. It seems we're treading water to keep up with all the changes of modern life and their effects on kids going through this critical age. Whether it's Pink Floyd, Queen, or Bowie, or MCR, music will always serve a role in that transformation into adulthood.

Kyle Died on a Beatles Day

Thursday October 31st

Portugal. The Man

I'm working on a paper in the shared newspaper/literary magazine office in the student center when I get the text from Kyle. "Hey man, class just ended. I'm heading over to Elmer's." I rush to a good stopping point in my work, grab my backpack, and head out to start off the weekend with him.

A few weeks ago, Kyle gave me a download of Portugal. The Man's album that came out last summer, *Evil Friends*. Back when I was still in high school, I avoided pirating music on principle. I valued the music I listened to and wanted to support the artists who made it. When I became that clichéd broke college student, I found a loophole: If someone else did the pirating, I'm just accepting the album as a gift from them, which isn't technically stealing from the artists (even though it very much *technically*, read *legally*, is). The album starts with a choked sounding synthesizer playing a teetering melody. It starts with a single tonic note and climbs a minor scale to reach a resolving perfect 4th. Then it teeters again before pushing up to a perfect 5th. Warmly strummed acoustic chords start harmonizing behind the synth, as if providing more encouragement than accompaniment. "Could it be that we got lost in the summer? / Well I know you know that it's over/ but you're still there treading water" sings front man John Gourley on this first track, "Plastic Soldiers."

Barely past 7 pm, the college bar isn't yet the crazy shitshow it will inevitably atrophy into. Elmer's is the divey kind of college bar I imagine lurks across the street

from every state university campus, somewhere in the shadow of student housing. It checks all the boxes: linoleum floors, duct-tape patched booths, splatter-painted walls. It draws a daytime crowd of local blue-collar men who come to watch sports but stay to flirt with the student bartenders. As the day turns to night, the small group of locals is replaced by hordes of students and the music shifts from Creedence Clearwater Revival to Chance the Rapper. The night is still young when I get to the bar, the patronage is in the beginning stages of shifting from subdued local crowd to drunken student debauchery. Kyle is already there, so I order a draft beer at the bar and go out to the patio to meet him.

Kyle's fashions himself like a hipster to the extent that it must be partly ironic--irony being a main staple of his sense of humor. Walking to the dining hall one frigid morning last January he quipped, "I can't stand Obama's weather policy. For all his promises of hope and change, New England winter still sucks." He dresses modestly, has curly red hair, freckles, black rimmed glasses, and wears a lot of flannel. I met him the way I met most of my college friends: outside the freshman dorm smoking cigarettes in the predawn hours on a weeknight. We connected through similar tastes in music, and I appreciated the irreverence in his sense of humor. One time when using the bathroom on his floor, I noticed some strikingly atypical graffiti in the stall. A well-drawn mountainous landscape cascaded above the toilet-paper dispenser. Above it in the sky was written "semen stains the mountaintops," a quote from Neutral Milk Hotel's "Communist Daughter" off of their iconic indie album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*. I was so excited when I returned to his room and blurted "Kyle, someone on this floor

listens to Neutral Milk Hotel!” When I told him about the drawing, he took credit for the artwork.

Discussing the day of classes and work, Kyle tells me about another student in his computer programming class whom he decided he doesn’t like and admits that most of his energy in class this semester will be spent directing negative thoughts towards this guy. Kyle describes him as a “bro,” any guy who always talks about parties and dresses like they’re on the sidelines for a basketball team. But sitting behind him, Kyle could see on his computer screen he was watching videos of the children’s cartoon “My Little Pony” the whole class period.

Kyle has a strange fascination, almost a love/hate obsession, with weirdos. He’s a natural comedian who will frequently blurt out inappropriate jokes just to get a reaction from people. His sense of humor is chaotic, targeting anyone and anything without discrimination or mercy. He reserves his most cutting ridicule for himself, his professors, and politicians. Occasionally his humor doesn’t punch so high, and he doesn’t resist making off-color jokes about minorities or the handicapped. This taboo element of his humor often comes with discomfort. To strangers, he could be off-putting, but those who know him well understand he’s a caring person just trying to get a laugh.

“Have you heard anything from the Arcade Fire album that came out last week?” Kyle asks.

“I haven’t had the chance to check it out yet.”

“I have it downloaded to my laptop. Come by later with a flash drive and I’ll give it to you.”

He's an expert programmer and uses the open-source Linux operating system. When I was in a basic programming class, he spent many afternoons helping me with assignments and teaching me how to code operations that were even more advanced than what was in the textbook. He is a great authority on almost everything tech, but his primary interests are phones and audio. Everyone in our group of friends consults him when looking for a new phone, and he often wears a ridiculous lime green Android hat that has eyes and two antennas sticking out like the little robot logo. He has a similar affinity for headphones and taught me most of what I know about how data compression algorithms degrade digital music files. He's also the source for a large percent of the music I have on my iPod.

Kyle is a bit of a weirdo himself. He comes off socially awkward at first. He speaks with a lisp, and around strangers at parties or around the dorm it's clear he's holding himself back from the jokes he'd normally make, wanting to make them laugh but not sure how or which lines to cross. Most people know him as the guy who will say the thing everyone is thinking.

Friday November 1st

Los Campesinos!

Most Fridays generally follow the same routine. Waking up around 8, I make breakfast in the apartment (semi-scrambled eggs and an English muffin) then grab my books and bike to campus. This morning I put on my headphones and play an album I got from Kyle called *Hello Sadness* by Los Campesinos!. Their sound has a more pop vibe than the music I usually listen to, somewhere in a valley between emo and indie, but their songs

are lyrically strong and carry a good beat. The album's single, "By Your Hand" is a ballad about a sloppy hook-up, exploring the cusp between the futile search for love in the modern era and irreverence toward hook-up culture. The lead singer describes going on a date at the start of a romantic relationship, but his girlfriend/date gets too drunk and "vomits down [his] rental tux" which causes him to ponder, "I'm not sure if it's love anymore/ But I've been thinking of you fondly for sure/ Remember what your heart is for." It's easy to see why Kyle would like a band like this. I'm sometimes hard pressed to know when to take him seriously.

I work through the morning in the literary magazine/newspaper office. Around noon, I walk across campus to the Middle Eastern cafe for a falafel wrap. There's a meeting with the literary magazine from 2-4. Kyle works at the campus key and student ID office and gets out around the same time, so we meet at the dining hall to grab a quick bite.

"The Black Bird, the Dark Slope" by Los Camp! plays on my iPod as I walk. The singer is being eaten alive by a black bird that lives within his ribcage. It doesn't have the pop jingle sound to it that "By Your Hand" hints at; it's more typical emo music with jabs of power chords and classic verse, chorus, verse structure, not to mention the martyred singer. In the song the singer destroys himself trying to kill the blackbird that's killing him from within.

In the dining hall I get a cup of tea and sit at a table by the window to wait for Kyle. He comes in carrying his backpack and Razor scooter, sets his stuff down and goes to get some food. He comes back with a fried chicken patty, French fries, and what he calls alternately the "heart attack" or the "fat American," which is a cup filled half with

hot cocoa, and half with soft-serve ice cream. We all generally eat like shit at college. One reason is because this is the first time, we've had to do grocery shopping for ourselves, and with no interest in planning out meals, we just buy processed crap that doesn't spoil. It's also our four-year pass to engage in the irresponsible lifestyles before we graduate and are forced to embrace things like colonoscopies and 401Ks. One time in biology class, we were studying nutrition and the digestive system and I realized I had not eaten a single vegetable in the past month.

Kyle has diabetes and wears an insulin pump that looks like an MP3 player on his hip. Whenever it chirps out to let him know he needs insulin, Kyle presses some buttons to satisfy it and carries on. I don't know much about diabetes beyond the basics, but Kyle seems to manage it.

While we're eating, we get a text from our friend Tony inviting us to go on a "res cruise" (riding in circles around the reservoir in Tony's Subaru while smoking a blunt and listening to music). Kyle says he's not feeling up to it and opts to go back to the apartments to take a nap. I walk to the parking lot to meet Tony.

Sunday November 3rd, 2013

Radical Face

Blaring sunlight wakes me too early. I drag my body and hangover out into the main room of the apartment. Sorting priorities, I first turn on the coffee maker, next I sift through records until I find Radical Face debut album, *Ghost* and put it on the turntable. With the dreamy, folk-rock acoustic songs and the smell of fresh coffee filling the room I pack the bong. Buffered by caffeine, music, and a steady high, I can now face my

headache dead on. My brain feels heavy and uneven, like it's sloshing around in my skull. It's been a riotous weekend of Halloween parties, and the whole apartment building has taken a hit. There's an archipelago of vomit trailing down the hallway. The floors in the elevators are sticky and make a kind of Velcro cackle as they cling to sneaker soles. The parking lot is booby-trapped with broken glass bottles.

Ghost is one of those flawless albums that can be played through. None of the tracks drag, and they all flow into each other, swelling and fading like breaths. It is one of the first records I bought after getting my turntable, and I play it often. I was first introduced to Radical Face in 2010 by my high school prom date Devon. The music has since attached itself to many memories from afternoons wandering about town center, to watching the sun rise after all-night house parties, and through the first two years of college. After a short intro called "Asleep on a Train" is the album single, "Welcome Home." It's a title I can't help but take literally, because the album is so familiar it feels like a musical home. The song is about finding a healing sense of refuge in the familiarity of a home, as Ben Cooper sings "Ships are launching from my chest/ Some have names but most do not/ If you find one please/ let me know what piece I've lost." Listening to it, I can fall back into the innocent wonder I had when I first heard it on Devon's car speakers, driving through the night, invigorated by the promise of having my whole life ahead of me.

A couple hours later I'm joined by my roommates, Chris and Emily, who emerge from the other bedroom. They ask me about the party I went to, and I try to give them as much detail as I can recall from the blurry fragments that remain. The night started at a house party, but my last memories were of being in one of the dorms. A short while later,

our friend Steve, who shares the apartment next door with Kyle comes in to hang out with us. We all smoke together and talk about our various misadventures from the past two days. Steve tells us Kyle hasn't been feeling well and spent most of yesterday in his room.

Monday November 4th, 2013

The Beatles

Monday morning always comes too soon. The skies are overcast outside my window, so I grab a hoodie in case it rains before biking to campus. By the time I get outside I see the clouds have scattered to pale streaks, leaving large patches of blue shining down. I listen to The Beatles' *Let it Be* album on my iPod. It's nice to start the week with some simple, uplifting tunes. Scrolling down, I press play on "Across the Universe." I have a vivid memory of playing with my band in high school, Weathervane, at a benefit concert for Amnesty International, and it was the closing song in most of our gigs because we could get the crowd to sing along. The sliding intro settles into a bright D major progression as Lennon reassures me "nothing's gonna change my world."

By the time I'm locking my bike in front of the student center, the song changes to "I Me Mine," with its crazy A minor waltz and George Harrison neurotically singing of the ego-laden collapse of the Beatles like a mantra, "all through the day/ I me mine, I me mine, I me mine." I buy a coffee and pick up the day's *New York Times* from one of the stacks. I sit down to read as the song switches to the chorus, which shifts to A major and a driving 4/4 rhythm. The song can't seem to decide if it's a traditional rock number

like the earlier Beatles records, or something with the more varied influences of their later works. It alternates between the two as I flip from the front-page news to op-eds.

I fold the paper into my backpack to finish later and bike to the English department to the upbeat bopper “One after 909.” My first class of the day is a poetry workshop with professor Ravi Shankar, who coincidentally shares the same name as the sitar player who mentored George Harrison. After class I go back to the student center to hang out with the editors of the student newspaper in our shared office.

Around noon, an announcement is made over the student center intercom. “There has been an emergency reported on campus. Please remain inside and stay away from windows and doors.”

If you’re going to be stuck on a college campus during a lockdown, there really is no better place than the school newspaper office. The rumors of what was happening outside start circulating the office, most of them involving some kind of shooter on campus. Some people were calling in saying they heard gunshots. There’s a small television in the office, and the paper’s photographer puts on the news.

Soon enough we’re watching helicopter footage showing the outside of a dorm building on the far end of campus. Police barricades block the road and men in black tactical gear move around the perimeter of the dorm. There appears to be armored S.W.A.T. vehicles in the parking lot. Reporters from CNN start calling the office for comments and information from student reporters while we watch the footage from CNN’s broadcast. Acadia, the editor-in-chief, takes to her own phone, trying to get details from campus safety and the university administration. She is told there was a 911

call reporting a man dressed in black, with kneepads and ammunition pockets, and wielding a samurai sword entering James Hall.

I start texting my friends with what information I had. Most of them are stuck in classrooms. I text my family to let them know about the developing situation and that I am in a safe location.

The story unfolds once the suspect is in custody and arrested for a breach of peace. He has no gun on him and the sword was part of a Halloween costume. He had just come back from a weekend partying at UConn.

After about three hours of watching cops and heavily armed men that were on the other side of campus on the office television, another announcement comes over the intercom: "It is now safe to exit the building. All afternoon and evening classes have been canceled." My first instinct is to get back to the apartment. I don't bother to put on music for the short bike ride, my mind still occupied with processing what had just happened.

Chris and Emily are already there; they had no morning classes and had not yet been to campus. Steve comes in shortly after me. He was stuck in a computer engineering classroom, and the professor wouldn't let students take out their cell phones. I tell them all the crazy, (thankfully) anticlimactic snafu that just unfolded. We pack the bong in relief that our school doesn't have to join the growing list of mass shootings and in celebration of our now free afternoon.

I think it's Emily who asks first, "Hey Steve, where's Kyle?" We go to check on him, knowing how much he'd relish the story of what had just happened.

We knock on the door. No answer. We call his name. No answer. We try the door. Locked. Chris takes out a credit card to try to jimmy the lock. His hands shake. Steve says “move back,” and mule-kicks the door open.

Kyle is face down on the floor, his feet on the edge of the bed like he had fallen out. He is wearing only boxer shorts. I hear his insulin pump chirp. Purple veins like a network of rivers run up and down his body. They congest in tangles around his chest and throat. I hear his insulin pump chirp. Emily dials 911. I rush to turn him over and am struck by the cold rigidity of his body. I hear his insulin pump chirp. He feels more like a mannequin than a person. His flesh feels clammy and soft. I shiver at the touch. I hear his insulin pump chirp. I don't dare look at his face. I hear his insulin pump chirp. I watch my knuckles as I press the heel of my palm into the center of his chest. I hear his insulin pump chirp.

The paramedics come, and I feel nothing. This numb neutrality seems wrong, like my emotional responses are failing me. I hear his insulin pump chirp. I look at the walls of his room and my eyes settle on the calendar by his door. In two weeks is a day marked “Anna-versary,” two weeks shy of celebrating four years together with his high school sweetheart, Anna. Will someone please, please make that chirping stop.

Walking out into the main room, I call Tony and tell him he should be here. Someone has called Kyle's father, Kurt, who shows up quickly. I met him once before at his house hanging out with Kyle and some friends. He's a large man who shares Kyle's wild, curly hair. I remember talking to him that day because Kyle had told me he plays bass in a classic rock cover band called Bad Mannerz. We had a short conversation about a prog-rock band called Porcupine Tree.

A paramedic asks if he wants to see his son one last time, adding that he doesn't recommend it. But what is a father to say when put with that kind of finality? The man is shaking, bleary-eyed as he walks out from Kyle's bedroom. He starts calling family members. He repeats the tragic news three times, in three separate conversations with three different people learning that Kyle will no longer be a part of their lives. Kyle has passed away. Kyle has passed away. Kyle has passed away. The repetition of this new reality expels me from the state of shock and I finally break down, unable to stand or stop the tears streaking down my face with all the force of comprehending Kyle's permanent absence from the world.

That night we sit together in the apartment: me, Steve, Chris, Emily, Tony, and Kurt. We keep the lights off and set out candles. Just a month ago, for my birthday, Kyle had given me a Votive candle with Morrissey from the Smiths on it, dressed saint's robes. Kurt is telling us stories about Kyle growing up. I'm trying to follow but "Across the Universe" is stuck in my head from this morning. I'm imagining endless rain and shades of life. I'm wondering how I ever believed that "nothing's gonna change my world."

Tuesday November 2nd

The next day, life feels like putting together an Ikea bookshelf. I know what life should look like and I did the best to imitate that. I awake to burning sunshine that fills the apartment. The day is crisp and cloudless, a classic New England autumn day. Thoughts don't follow any particular order, inhibiting my ability to concentrate on anything. I know that I shower in the mornings, so I take a shower. A Portugal. The Man song plays

in my head: “You, you carried us all/ Down from the stars/ And up from the sea, where everybody knew/ All you see and all you hear is all you need/ And all you be is what you create/ And it’s in your mind.” When I get out of the shower the music in my head stops. Standing naked in the middle of my room, I stare at a wall and cry.

To distract myself from thinking, I listen to the Radical Face album, *The Branches* that just came out a couple weeks ago as I bike to campus. Ben Cooper’s familiar voice and guitar mixes with the songs I hadn’t heard before. It’s the same routine, but nothing feels the way it used to. Cool, November sunshine pours over everything. *I support these improvements to Obama’s weather policy* Kyle would have joked.

My first class is a nonfiction writing workshop. I sit at my desk but keep my headphones on as the song “The Gilded Hand” plays: “...And you know/ Somewhere in there you know/ There’s nothing here but surviving/ ‘Till something goes away.”

I turn off the music when the professor enters. She asks if anyone has anything to say about the lockdown that happened yesterday. A girl at the other end of the room says she was “traumatized” by the incident. She even had a nightmare about getting shot. She plans to talk to the school therapist to help her through the trauma and offers his email to anyone else who is interested in setting an appointment.

At some point, the professor sees me while I have my head in my hands, staring straight down at the closed notebook on my desk. She pulls me outside.

“Is everything okay?”

“I lost a close friend yesterday,” I manage to mumble.

I must appear about as shattered as I felt inside, as a look of genuine concern and empathy spreads across her face. She leans in and gives me a warm hug. “You should go home, take the day off. You’re going to need time to heal. It may take months, even years. But today, you should be with friends or family. You should be taking care of yourself.”

The apartment is the last place I want to be. I sit alone on a bench in the upper quad and listen to *The Branches*. The third track is a song called “The Mute” about a boy growing up who feels a deep connection with the dead spirits he can hear, but when it comes to his mom and dad and the living people in his life, he feels misunderstood and thinks of himself as a burden on them. I listen to it on repeat for hours and watch the students pass. Everything outside on this temperate, bright day clashes with what I feel inside. The sun drifts westward, tucking behind the clock tower on the other end of campus. I replay memories in my mind until the evening turns dark and cool. I can’t go back in time, so I get on my bike and go home.

The following weeks passed like an unbalanced reality.

I still couldn’t concentrate or process the thoughts in my head. I couldn’t decide what was important anymore. On the same day as Kyle’s wake I had a midterm exam in a science class. I stared at the blank questions and thought about a tree that grew in the backyard of my childhood home in Wilton.

At the wake, Kyle was dressed in a green flannel shirt he often wore. He would celebrate what he called “Flannel Fridays.” I supposed he would now keep that tradition

forevermore. I wasn't sure what I was looking at when I stepped up to the casket. He looked so different from the friend I knew. He wasn't wearing his glasses, and his wild hair seemed tamed and flatter. I had been to other wakes, but had never seen someone so young in a casket. Outside I stood with my friends in the sunlight. My friend Greg said, "I don't believe it. Just last week, homie was here, chillin' with us all." He took a long pause, "We'll never have that again." Emily wanted to take a picture of all of us together. Everything about it felt wrong. It wasn't a moment I wanted to hold onto, so I stepped out of the frame. I asked my friend Jess to ride with me back to the apartments.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Not really," I said. "Is that okay?"

She put her arm around me as I drove.

For the next month or so I wore my headphones whenever I wasn't in direct conversation with someone. Silence would incite panic, and music was the only thing that calmed my mind. Those albums I listened to through the fall of 2013 absorbed the weight of Kyle's absence from my life. They helped me carry all those emotions as I tried to make my way through the semester. All the music Kyle gave me carried memories of the times we were together and became the soundtrack of his enduring spirit. As each passing moment takes me further from when Kyle was alive, I will carry this music and their memory-loaded melodies with me.

Dear MTA,

Someone grabbed my ass cheek on the F train this morning. I think it was the man with the crooked beard. It was the first physical human connection all week. It's so good to be reminded we have a solid form to make contact with other forms and be felt. I hope someone grabs this man's ass cheek so he too can know the power in a body touched.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Radiohead

What is Radiohead's identity? They have the reputation as "the band my older brother got me into" or as FOX News correspondent Kat Timpf mocked, "I don't even like [Radiohead] but the kind of guys I go for have to be three things: strange, malnourished, and sad, and those guys always like Radiohead." For better or worse, I can see where she's coming from. I started listening to Radiohead around my junior year of high school when I found their album *Kid A* in the public library. I was at that point in adolescence where I felt acutely alone, and lacking genuine wit or intelligence, the only way I attracted the attention of girls would be to portray myself as moody and weird. I wasn't self-aware enough to actually be conscious of how Radiohead's music expressed this side of my identity. Perhaps an analysis of the band's identity could help understand why they make certain musical decisions. In rock culture, the fans represent bands almost as much as the actual musicians, so let's consider the three qualities of Timpf's Radiohead fan and apply them to the band itself.

First, they are strange. The band's songs are largely about alienation, isolation, or being an underdog. They describe a world of paranoia and self-doubt. There's a sense of contrarianism that runs through all their music and lyrics, which has often come across as a representation of not belonging.

Second, malnourishment, or self-abasement. I wouldn't recommend putting on a Radiohead record to feel happy or get pumped up. I particularly appreciate their music in times when I'm frustrated with myself because self-sabotage is also a common theme in their music. "Creep" is still their most famous song and stands as an anthem of self-deprecation. Even though their music style changes dramatically with almost every

album, in many ways this song is the perfect prelude to their entire career (We'll get into that later). This song shows Radiohead's identity is rooted in self-loathing.

Sadness is a strong element in Radiohead music, but perhaps malcontent would be more specific and accurate to what they actually express. Someone who is content with themselves would probably continue doing the same thing, and Radiohead is known for constantly changing their sound. Thom Yorke is publicly critical of his own music, and die-hard fans know it's a rare gem when they perform songs from their earlier albums. This constant changing speaks to the sense of questioning self-identity that is a large part of Radiohead music. Their most notable reinvention happened in 2000 when they released *Kid A*. The album introduced electronic and more abstract elements to the band's sound. This distanced them from all other rock bands at the time who were doing everything they could to muddy and distort their sound. This period was a high-water mark for grunge and heavy metal music, with bands like Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, and Queens of the Stone Age. Rock music of the time insisted on instrumental physicality while pop music started embracing digitization, sampling, and synthesized instruments. Radiohead was one of the only bands asking "why not have both?"

Going into how all three of these things work in a particular song, it helps to start with the beginning. Thom Yorke's professed least favorite Radiohead song is their 1992 debut single, "Creep." The song is in G Major and follows the main chord progression: G-B-C-Cm. Starting from the tonic, it goes up to the mediant with a sharp third that makes it unnaturally major. The next chord is the subdominant C major, but then there's a modal interchange where we get C minor from the relative G minor key. Already there are two chords that don't belong in this key, but what makes this progression really stand

out is the way Thom Yorke follows the chords with his vocal melody. In the chorus when he sings “I’m a weirdo” over the G to B change he hits the notes B-F#-D#, which is an arpeggiated B major, so the melody is outlining the underlying harmony. Then he sings “What the hell am I doing here,” over the B-C change he resolves back to the B, the major 7 of C major. In the next bar, he sings “I don’t belong here” and hits a B flat as the chords go from C to C minor. This shows that Radiohead probably starts writing songs with a chord progression, then write a melody over it, a process that focuses more on harmony whereas most rock/pop music is driven by catchy melodies.

In 1994 the band released *The Bends*, featuring the song “My Iron Lung” which uses the chord progression G-Cm. The melody is mostly set in C dorian, except for the ends of each verse which has resolution from D to B, instead of the B flat normally found in C dorian. These hit the 3rd and 5th of the G major chord Yorke is singing over, but then resolve on E flat, which is the third of the Cm when the chords change. Again, the melody is following where the harmony leads, which is often, tellingly, the relative minor key.

In ‘97 Radiohead released their masterpiece *OK Computer*, which featured the song “Paranoid Android.” the chord progression looks like this:

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| Cm | Cm/Bb | Cm/F | Cm/A Cm/Bb |  
||: Gm | Gm/A Gm/Bb | Gm/E | Gm/E :||
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This progression starts in C dorian with the first line, but the second line is in G dorian when the A switches to E. So, there’s a very subtle key change halfway through. The

melody Yorke wrote to sing over it has both the A natural of C dorian and the E natural of G dorian that highlight the major 6 of both dorian scales.

Dorian is the prevalent mode Radiohead seems to like writing in. Even as their sound has evolved through the years, the mechanics of their music seem consistent on the music theory level. It's that modal key that helps give Radiohead their distinct melancholic sound. It's not the flat-out depression of aeolian minor that has both a minor third and a minor sixth. Dorian has the minor third, but also a major sixth. It's a key that isn't optimistic, but isn't giving up either.

Radiohead didn't only transgress diatonic harmonization, they also incorporated strange polyrhythms in their songs that have ambiguous downbeats. For example, on the album *In Rainbows*, the final song "Videotape" at first seems like the piano is playing a straight-forward pattern of four even half notes played in a two-bar chord progression. But when the drums come in about a minute, twenty seconds into the song the half notes appear to fall on the syncopated eighth note before the half beat. This illusion of the downbeat has an unsettling effect. The listener may think they know what's going on, until the band shifts everything.

Radiohead also frequently flirts with major keys in ways that undermine the "happy" harmonies, like in "Creep" when there's the B major that's out of key. This is like a child's doll in a horror movie--it's an eerie, out of place smile in an otherwise dark world. It creeps us out. In other cases, they substitute a major chord with a minor chord, which produces a more spacy or surreal sound, like in "No Surprises" that goes F-Bb minor instead of F-Bb.

Radiohead songs also have longer chord progressions than most pop/rock music, which typically come in 4 or 8 bars long. In the Radiohead catalogue, “Jigsaw Falling into Place” and “Paranoid Android,” both stretch out to 12 bar progressions. “Knives Out” has 11, and “Nude” switches from 10 to 12. This is mostly used in slower, less attention-grabbing songs, and it breaks up the structure by making it less accessible while simultaneously easier to get lost in the music. This is a big part of why many people don’t get into Radiohead upon first listen or consider them an “acquired taste.”

If at any time this talk of non-diatonic chord substitutions and strange, modal harmonies felt confusing or inaccessible, that just may be the point. Their music is about isolation and being misunderstood, but it’s *not* about wanting to belong. They’re on the outside looking in, but they don’t envy the view. I suspect that Thom Yorke is doing a lot more 3-dimensional music theory chess in his songwriting that’s beyond my understanding. But you don’t have to *understand* Radiohead to *feel* their music. It’s nice to know and appreciate what they are doing musically, but anyone can tell a Radiohead song from a Coldplay song after just a couple bars. There’s something transgressive and unique about their approach to writing songs. It’s their biggest draw, but it’s also what keeps troves of casual listeners from becoming fans. Their music speaks to a very specific member of society, one who is critical, discontent, and lonely. That person sees flaws in their self, and is always course-correcting. They are on the fringe of society, but probably on purpose. And, bafflingly, there’s a Fox News correspondent who may be interested if they’re single.

Dear MTA,

I took the seat of a pregnant woman, after she deserted it at 94th St station. I felt the warmth of her absence against the warmth of my own buttocks. I could almost sense the heaviness inside her, the weight of what she expects and the burden of what might be expected of her. The feeling made me want to curl into a fetal position right there on the still-warm seat in the acknowledgement that nothing can match the creativity of a mother.

Radical Face

National Sawdust

As I watched the clock on my office computer tick the minutes until we could leave, I thought of my recent break up. Before all that, I intended to take her to this show tonight. I've never gone to a concert just by myself before, but I know I couldn't miss my favorite band on one of the very rare nights they were in town.

It's Thursday, and the company I work for holds a party in the office on the last Thursday of every month. The clock strikes five and we all leave our desks and congregate in the break room with beer and food. I have a couple hours to kill before I have to head to Brooklyn, which is an ideal opportunity to have a couple free drinks before the show. I mention my plans for the night to a group of coworkers. They've never heard of Radical Face or Ben Cooper's other project Electric President and are unwilling to go out to Brooklyn on a weeknight to find out. So my ex's ticket to this rare and sold out show goes to waste.

Now, Brooklyn New York can be a pretty hip place and thus not a place for people who still like using out of fashion words like "hip." As I walk into National Sawdust, I'm hit with the realization that I'm probably the least cool person in this building. I'm still wearing my casual work clothes--polo shirt, jeans, and a light fake leather jacket. My only hope is that I'm so untrendy that my appearance here seems intended ironically.

I find myself talking with Andrew, whose muscular form appears to test the seams of his striped t-shirt. He's engaged to his boyfriend of three years and getting married next summer. The natural conversation ensues between the lovesick and the in love. I told

him how I met my ex in college. We shared an office in the student center. She was an editor of the newspaper; I was the editor of the literary magazine. But we had fundamental differences. I thought her love of fashion reflected a materialism that made me uncomfortable, and she was always telling me how to dress. She thought Ed Sheeran played rock music. After two years of dating, I don't remember ever seeing her pick up a book. These minor mismatches in personalities compiled until we clearly just didn't fit.

The conversation takes a surprising turn when he starts talking about all the problems they had at the beginning of the relationship and the multiple times they broke up. I take this as affirmation of my recent cynicism until he says something to the effect of "I love him because I can." Through all the mundane and trying missteps in any relationship it can be all too easy to forget we have this ability. Thanks to Andrew, I'm making a renewed commitment to loving the people in my life.

Over at the merch table I buy a t-shirt and ask the guy how he knows Ben Cooper. He says they grew up together in Florida and have been best friends for most of their lives. Radical Face doesn't tour very often, but he always asks Ben if he could come along. His favorite town he's followed the band to is Nashville. "No other town lives and breathes music like they do there."

The opening band starts promptly at 9:30. They're the drummer and keyboard player from Radical Face and they call themselves The Little Books. As they finish their short set, the drummer leans in to the mic and thanks the crowd "for being respectful listeners." This gets a round of bemused applause and he remarks "what, have you ever played for New Yorkers before? You guys aren't always so easy." The crowd still seems undecided whether to take this as an insult or compliment. We can't all be Nashville.

As roadies reset the stage, it looks like a spaceship crash landed in a Siberian forest. The back has white acoustic panels cut like tangrams with black seams. The stage is decorated with a few skeletal, white trees with lights like glowing leaf sprouts. I notice the stage rises only a couple feet off the ground. I make my way to the front where everyone is seated to make it possible for others to see. Sitting next to me is Zoe, who works in marketing for Spotify. This seems like a dream job for any music lover as she casually notes “we had Spoon come in the office today.” I must have looked impressed because she tempers it saying “Sometimes it’s really disappointing though. I met Isaac Brock [front-man of Modest Mouse] and he was totally rude to me. I lost a ton of appreciation for his music that day.”

Radical Face takes the stage, and eerily there seems to be a hush. People cheer but no one screams, and the overhead lights dim more like the start of a movie rather than a concert. Ben Cooper shares the stories behind the songs before he plays each one. Before playing “Summer Skeletons” he claims it’s “the only happy song I think I ever wrote; it was an accident, I swear.”

People talk a lot about “intimate acoustic performances” but I have never been to a concert with general admission tickets where people were sitting in front of the stage, and though every song the crowd was absolutely silent. Just pure entrancement between the band and the crowd, separated by a low platform stage, brought together by pure organic music.

Dear MTA,

I love the thin slit of your turnstile. The pleasant way my Metrocard slides down its metal crevice, always the most satisfying part of the MTA experience. Every time I hear your electronic moan consenting entrance into the city's arterial bowels I want to shout "Yes! Let me enter your longest train. I offer my ass to your puke colored seats. I offer my hand to your erect poles lubricated by greasy palms. Let us unite, inhale the exhale of each other. Let us savor and keep pure our public intimacy.

The Normal Stranger

Wednesday morning a dishwater gray sky hangs over midtown Manhattan. Outside Grand Central a red vested woman is aggressively handing out this week's free issue of Time Out. On the other side of Vanderbilt Ave an older man is hunched by a New York Post rack. Next to him a vender offers coverage in the form of black umbrellas to those pessimistic about that overcast sky. I'm struck by a flatulent wave of exhaust as the M42 bus disgorges passengers on the corner of Madison Ave. Walking West towards the Garment District the flow of pedestrians passing like so much flotsam brushing and weaving down a river. It's a solemn procession; the only people who smile are either tourists or mentally insane. I see many of the same faces every day. Always with passing acknowledged recognition, but never making eye contact. It's a cold comfort.

Navigating overcrowded sidewalks is an instinctive skill for native New Yorkers but can be acquired after repetitive commutes turn it into a mindless ordeal. You start noticing the various types of walkers. There are those reverent walkers who look like monks with bowed heads, tucked in elbows, and hands clutching their cellphones by their chests. They trudge slowly, short-sighted, with small steps in this prayer-like posture, moving absently, not able to keep pace with those around them, not always able to avoid walking into people or obstacles on the sidewalk. Commonly seen around the holidays and summertime are the family chains. These tourist groups are hardest to pass as they tend to link hands in a phalanx as they gawk upwardly at the phallic Midtown architecture. There are also drifters. Like drivers who can't stay in their lane, some walkers are prone to sway maddeningly into your path for no reason as you try passing them from behind. Some commuters are clearly old-hats at walking the sidewalks. They

deftly duck and weave through the small gaps between their fellow pedestrians. They move like football halfbacks finding gaps in the defensive line of pedestrians, timing it seamlessly so no one has to alter their pace for them. They anticipate the rhythms of traffic lights and cross streets between blocks to avoid waiting at intersections. If you get behind a duck 'n' weaver, and are nimble enough to keep up, you can shave minutes off the commute.

The first familiar face that passes me is Stretch. He's a balding, middle aged white guy, kinda pudgy, always in a business suit (typically heather grey or charcoal, though he occasionally goes for plaid) and always walking with one arm raised overhead, the other also held up but bent at the elbow so his hand is behind his head, switching with every long stride he takes through Bryant Park.

Walking down Broadway, I pass by Sherlock. He's always sitting out on one of the metal tables between the sidewalk and the street, reading the Times and smoking a pipe. The sweet, piney tang of pipe tobacco is a welcome alternative to choking on cigarette smoke from some impassable smoker walking a few paces ahead and leaving a caustic cloud in their wake.

Big Horse is usually getting a coffee from the stand on the corner of 7th. He looks to be in his late thirties, about six feet, wears large wire rimmed glasses, and has a waxed mustache and a long ponytail. I wonder if he even recognizes this average height, average looking, skinny guy who passes him each day.

On 7th and 39th, there's a public phone booth--the phone to which has a smashed mouthpiece with frayed wires hanging out of it. On some days there'll a group of young men who huddle in a circle next to it passing around a joint or blunt. Sometimes they

duck into the booth in pairs to exchange bags and bills. As a commuter, it's encouraging to see even drug dealers up and at work in the mornings.

Urban Outfitter sits on a curb outside a fabric and dress store on 37th. She strikes me as trendy, wearing tall boots and jackets of surprising colors, like a maroon leather, or a mustard yellow denim. She's always smoking a cigarette and looking like she's posing for a picture no one is taking. Even on this dull, overcast morning she wears reflective aviator sunglasses that mirror the sidewalk in front of her. If I seem judgmental here, you should see the critical glare she flashes me most days.

I drift into the office on 37th St. I say good morning as I pass the building security man in the lobby. This is one of three things I say to him each day. It's always either "Good morning" as I enter, "have a good evening" as I leave, or "have a good weekend" on Fridays. I just nod and smile leave the office for lunch. I don't know his name or anything about him. He is a part of my daily life.

Inside the office on the tenth floor, the same routine recurs every day. Setting my backpack down by my desk, I turn on my computer. I take my coffee mug and water bottle to the kitchen and fill both. My coworker Panyin is normally eating breakfast (banana, bowl of cereal) after coming from the gym. Walking back towards my desk, I stop at Sam's desk. We talk about either computer programming, playing guitar, or general weekend plans. This differs from the conversations we have when we take break together, either getting coffee at Greg's on 8th Ave or playing guitars in the amp room in Sam Ash on 34th St. Those conversations, outside the office, generally broach topics like family, girlfriends, personal projects and life goals.

I have lunch with the same crew every day. They all work on different teams within the department, and the one thing that originally brought us together is that we all generally start our lunch break around 1pm. Alonso is a transplant from the Midwest now living in Harlem. He writes and performs standup comedy and likes discussing outrageous hypothetical situations. Michael W reliably has a story or two to share about some guy he met on Grindr. The other week it was a dude named Eric, who's a stage crew for a Broadway theater. Michael brought him home after meeting for drinks. He woke up and found Eric was gone and his mattress was soaked in urine. Adriana lives with her Greek family in Astoria and makes her own jewelry.

My actual job is not challenging or particularly interesting. It requires an agreeable disposition, sparse knowledge from primary education, even sparser knowledge from secondary education, and some basic facts about media publishing and the ad industry. The rest depends on an ability to stare into a computer monitor for hours and forgetting there's more to life.

My favorite part of every day is the train ride home. I catch the 6:16. Weaving my way through Grand Central's main concourse, I make my way to track 13. *Any unattended luggage will be seized by and subject to search by the MTA police. Thank you for your cooperation.* There's the usual mix of tourists/commuters. The commuters can be trusted to keep a steady pace, indicating which way they may bob, weave, or pass with a subtle tilt of the head or shoulders. The tourists drift about with much less awareness. They twirl with their mobile cameras pointed at the ornate and famous Grand Central ceiling. The only motionless bodies are the aimless commuters awaiting track assignment announcements, the small crowd of people waiting by the clock in the middle, a likely

rendezvous for incoming friends/relatives. Armed soldiers lurk against periphery walls in groups of two or three. They look conspicuous amid the urban-dressed travelers in their camouflage uniforms, holding large rifles against their bodies. *For your safety, please do not sit on the stairs or in the hallways at Grand Central Station. Thank you for your cooperation.*

The front two cars on the train are the quiet cars. There's always a catch 22 when it comes to seats on Metro North trains. I typically sit in a two-seater bench. If someone sits with me, I'm easily perturbed by little things—they take up too much space; they snack noisily; they smell weird. But if no one sits with me I worry that I seem unapproachable. Though I appreciate having the extra space to myself, the feeling of rejection stays with me all the way to my stop. Settling into my seat, I pull out my notebook to write about my day and whatever thoughts I have that are interesting or troubling enough to be put on paper then swap it for whatever book I'm reading. I glance up once more at the faces of familiar strangers, their lives perpetually as inaccessible to me as mine is to them. We ride together in silence through the hollow artery beneath Park Avenue.

Dear MTA,

It annoys locals and thrills tourists, but I don't think I'll ever tire of "showtime." I'm just baffled that the MTA discourages these performances in subway cars. You get these young, athletic dancers to entertain stone-faced, strap-hanging passengers, and you don't even have to pay them. Maybe too much has been said about it already. But at the risk of adding to the noise, I can only say showtime makes me forget I'm in a rat-infested tunnel which is, in these fleeting moments of flips and twirls, preferable to life above ground.

The Paper Kites

Le Poisson Rouge

At 5:50 on a dark Friday at the cusp of December, I can consider this week complete. I have stared into harsh LCD computer monitors on my desk for the requisite hours five days in a row to earn a two-day reprieve. Despite working in an office building that houses nine companies across eighteen floors, I have only shared brief, face-to-face interactions with about five human beings all day. My knees crack audibly as I get up to pull on my jacket. I salute Jerrod and wish Dana a good weekend on my way to the elevators. The tally of Brief Human Interaction now at seven.

On the downtown E train, there's an uncomfortable feeling when I look up and see the person across from me staring directly at me. Probably just coincidence, so I look away. I stare blankly at the advertisements above the strap-hanging passengers. When I get the sense of being watched I glance back and am met with direct eye-contact with the same woman. She has straight blonde hair that's starting to get pale with age. She looks entirely non-threatening except for bright blue eyes, unflinching and aimed directly at mine. I pull out my phone and scroll through old text messages to look busy until she gets off at 14th street.

The Paper Kites just released a new album in September called *On the Corner of Where You Live*. The first track starts with random sound snips of murmured street chat behind a crooning tenor sax. The song floods my skull from headphones as I follow the slow-moving mass of people up to the W4th street exit.

It's a drizzly evening in Greenwich Village, producing the thick spattery sound of shoes and the tear of tires from shallow puddles on the slick pavement. Small rivers run between the sidewalks and greasy streets. A block away from the venue, there's a corner pub with the enticing name Jo Jo's Philosophy. I'm mildly disappointed to find the interior decorated with tacky, alcoholic quotes on wooden boards like "It was a wise man who invented beer" and "wish you were beer." It's a mundane comfort to feel like you're drinking inside some Etsy profile.

I find an open seat at the bar and order a beer. The bartender, Keisha is short and insanely attractive, with a small nose ring, impressive afro, and tight-fitting t-shirt. She has to reach above her head to pull the tap handles when pouring draughts. Her plans for the weekend consist of working, playing video games, and letting her fiancé plan out their wedding. "I'm not, like, your typical girl, and I'm *definitely* not gonna be no bridezilla...I told him 'look, this is our budget I don't give a fuck what you do as long as there's an open bar,'" she says, reaching up for the Brooklyn Lager tap.

It's a tame crowd drinking here this evening. Mostly young professionals and a few NYU students partaking in the practice of happy hour to cap off the work week. A couple next to me is sharing a plate of wings and listing all the historical inaccuracies of the new Queen movie. The thumping bass of a pop song from early 2000s punctuates the cheerful din. I don't like admitting it to myself, but sometimes being alone in a bar full of attractive people makes me sad.

I get a text from Jess, who says she's had a rough day. She said she's too tired to go out, but doesn't want to be alone on a Friday night. For a moment I'm of two minds whether or not I want to go to the concert. *I've seen them before. But they put on one of*

the most imaginative live shows. I wonder what Jess' loneliness feels like I wonder how morally entitled I am to enjoy this show tonight. What if the show doesn't live up to the experience I had last time? What if going to concerts ever becomes less meaningful as an occasion? What kind of person would I be if I stopped enjoying live music? Would I be able to replace it with something as meaningful? More meaningful? I wonder what kind of philosophical dialogues take place in Jo Jo's Philosophy on a typical Friday night?

At that moment, the man sitting to my right pulls out his phone and starts scrolling through Instagram. Images of models in lingerie flow by in a river of lewdness. Feeling thoroughly embarrassed for the guy I finish my beer and start walking to the venue.

Walking down the stairs into Le Poisson Rouge, I make my way up front as the opening band, Horse Leave is starting. They sound tight, more traditional rock than the Paper Kites who tend to have more moody and spacey tones cut through their music. The small crowd gathered at the foot of the stage swayed and bobbed respectfully, which was met with gratitude from the band as they finished their short set.

Two girls standing in front of me asked me to take a picture of them with the stage in the background. An unlit stage with roadies setting up equipment may not seem quite Instagram worthy, but I'm not one to judge. Their names are Emily and Sarah. They've been Paper Kites fans for about two years now and this is their first time seeing them. Emily has long dark hair and thick hipster glasses. She's taking courses at the CUNY campus a few blocks away to become a teacher. Her friend has light brown hair, but seems more interested in her phone and watching the stage crew still setting up than talking with us. Sarah asks Emily to come with her to get a drink at the bar. Emily tells

her to go ahead, she'll catch up. We exchange numbers and smiles. But I don't end up texting her. I text Jess instead, hoping she's feeling better and settling into the weekend.

"You're always out doing fun things" she replies.

"I wish you were with me."

The band takes the stage and they sound surprisingly shaky. The singer even misses a verse and restarts a song halfway through. The music is good, but the vibe is strangely disconnected. There's no sense of unity in the crowd, no feeling of a collective experience. I think part of this is due to structure. There's an alley between the stage and a divider where a couple photographers dart back and forth, creating a physical distance and separation between the crowd and band. The venue is not so full, and there's sparsely populated space between those close to the stage and those sitting in the elevated seating in back.

But the sense of alienation disappears mid-set. Between songs the singer announces he wants to "try something different" and requests the venue turn off all the lights they can. The stage goes black except for the power lights on the amplifiers and a small foot lap lighting the guitar pedals. The house lights go down except for the exit signs and lights over the two bar stations in back. In the darkness, they started playing some of their softer, acoustic folk ballads. The music seemed to have no direct source, just filling the room in the absence of light. Closing my eyes, I imagined no venue containing us, no bodies separating us, just a crowd of consciousness together absorbing the music.

Dear MTA,

I have no evidence, but I believe that someone on this train is holding a gun. I demand to know which of these strangers staring at the pocket robot in their lap is also packing heat. "Shoot me," I'd offer. "I missed breakfast this morning. There is space in my stomach for all of your violent, little bullets." Our bodies are precious, these sacks of bile and bone. We need them to dance our daily odysseys beneath the streets. Now I'm scared, that I am the one who has a gun.

Claypool Lennon Delirium

Irving Plaza

I met up with Ally in Grand Central for our second concert and third date together. The summer was coming to a close, and it felt like a transition period in my life. I was still getting over a breakup with Kiley, whom I had been dating since the last year of college. Even though I finished my degree last July, I did the whole cap and gown ceremony in May. I volunteered for the Bernie Sanders campaign only to learn later that the DNC was doing everything they could to undermine the electoral system and deny him the nomination. I read about Les Claypool, the bassist/front-man of Primus partnering up with Sean Lennon for a project called the Claypool Lennon Delirium. They released an album in June, *Monolith of Phobos*, and when I stumbled upon it while browsing LPs in a record store I figured I should give it a try.

The album starts off with reversed, looped bass on title track. A distorted guitar with heavy reverb and delay cuts through the bass like Doppler blips on a radar until it breaks the loop into spacey shards of echoes. The steady bass returns, backed by ghostly female voices while Lennon plays a minimalist, sliding guitar solo up and down through the ether of sound. Claypool's bass thumbs prominently in the mix, showcasing his imaginative licks and virtuosity. Lennon plays more languidly, keeping the tracks from getting overcrowded and fills in the spaces with jangly, psychedelic guitar that is heavy on the reverb and a watery sounding flanger effect during solos. The two vocal styles of the duo also complement each other. Claypool sings with a gruff southern twang while Lennon's voice is softer with hints of the nasally Liverpool accent and a knack for harmonizing he inherited from his dad. The lyrics throughout the album, just like the music behind them, are equal parts strange, silly, and dark.

Ally and I met, like a growing number of millennial couples, on a dating app. Our profiles indicated similar interests in music and movies, so we connected and started texting and calling every night for about a week before meeting for the first time in person.

“What kind of place will you take me to impress me for our first date,” she asked playfully.

I suggested Middle Eastern café in downtown Stamford and we made plans for dinner that Friday. When I first saw her, she looked shorter than in her online profile pictures. We hugged and the top of her head pressed against my cheek. After dinner and a few drinks, we took a walk down to a private beach to watch the moonlight dance on the waves of the Long Island Sound. “Wanna go for a swim?” she ventured. I hesitated for just a moment. The late-summer evening warmth on my skin and the internal warmth from a whiskey sour at the bar gave me the confidence to take off my shirt and jeans. Anticipating the coolness of the water, I left my underwear on to conceal any unflattering shrinkage. It was late and off a quiet street, but there were several houses that we were in view of. I didn’t want to be completely naked if someone caught us trespassing. Ally slipped out of her green silk dress, revealing purple bra and panties. We swam out to some rocks about thirty yards offshore. The night air felt cooler on our wet bodies. Ally’s pale skin glistened in the moonlight. That was when we had our first kiss.

The next week I saw the Claypool Lennon Delirium was going to play a show in Manhattan, so I got tickets and invited Ally to go with me. It was a Wednesday night, so she agreed to take a train from Stamford and meet me in the city after work.

One of the stand-out tracks on the record, “Boomerang Baby” describes a millennial “drowning in stimulation” and the numbing effect of the modern input inundation. The song grooves in a 7/8 meter, which gives it an unbalanced, overloaded feel that matches the content of the lyrics. The song verges on sanctimoniously ironic as Lennon sings “true love is something that your grandmother was fooled into believing,” suggesting that young people have little interest in real romance, and dating for them is mere recreation. It feels a little patronizing, but, in a general sense, he’s not entirely wrong either.

Ally walked up to me at the iconic clock under the constellations of the main concourse wearing bright lipstick and a black dress that was open on the sides.

“What do you think?” She asked, doing a quick twirl.

“You look stunning. How was the trip in?”

We took a 6 train down to Union Square and go to get a drink at the Headless Horseman bar around the corner from the venue. Ally has a master’s degree in art history so I asked her about her favorite artists.

She claimed, “If I could have dinner with anyone, alive or dead, I think I would choose Andy Warhol.” I never had a taste for the pop art movement and I don’t know much about Warhol, but I’ve held the impression that he’s partially responsible for inextricably blending art with corporatism. But I chose not to push the issue, being too early in the evening—and the relationship in general—to start having disagreements.

We made our way into Irving Plaza as the Delirium were starting. Sean Lennon’s face looked like a perfect blend of his parents’ features. He had John’s narrow, pointy nose, and Yoko’s wide jawline. His eyes were darkened by the brim of a police hat. Les

Claypool stood to his left wearing a bowler hat and playing his custom Pachyderm bass with its long, loopy body. The songs were packed with interchanging solos from both axmen, which showcased their different styles. Ally danced with a lot of hip movement, with the psychedelic lights from the stage outlining the curves of her slender body. The set finished with a cover of The Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows," in which Sean Lennon's singing voice was virtually indistinguishable from his father's. Yoko Ono made an appearance during the encore of the show and literally just screamed into a microphone while the band played a cover of Primus' "Southbound Pachyderm." Both Ally and I agreed sometimes modern art goes too far. It was a weird ending to an overall great show.

Dear MTA,

Follow these steps when practicing the lean of the platform waiter. First square your feet with toes over the yellow bumps and heels on the tile. Twist at the hips so your shoulders angle towards the darkness. Take note of the empty chip bag to rat ratio. It's best, when peering into that void, to try imagining your childhood home. I cannot guarantee my methods will make the trains come on time, but I promise at least you'll look like you belong.

Unfit to Serve

It's a drizzling Thursday morning, and I'm on my way to a building which until today I've managed to avoid entering my entire life -- a city courthouse. I've been summoned for jury duty, a civic responsibility which strikes me as metonym for the minor inconveniences and bummers of being an adult. Three years ago, when I got my first letter, I was able to decline because I had the privileged status of college student. This time I have no excuse to keep me from arriving at court at 8:30.

Of course, there's a line to get through security. Of course, it's slow moving. Of course, despite having four metal detectors, only one is in use. The ceiling is high, supported by white stone walls with quotes attesting to the importance and purity of the US judicial system. It takes 20 minutes to move 10 feet, then I'm in. I sign in and take the elevator to the third floor and follow signs to the jury assembly room. I sign in again and hand in an information form. I'm tempted to describe the two pleasant, helpful ladies working at each desk as librarian-like. They both have the same tortoise shell glasses, frizzy shoulder length hair with hints of gray, and wear variations of the same vaguely floral blouse. Picture your fifth-grade teacher and chances are you're not far off.

A bald guy sitting near the back waves at me and after a second, I recognize him as Mike, one of the coaches in the local little league, so I take a seat next to him.

"Hey, Tyler. How's it going?"

"Not bad, coach. Have you ever done this before?"

"Yeah. I'm hoping to get out by three. I have to pick my son up from school. You taking any games this season?"

"Can't, unfortunately. Between schoolwork and my job, I'm just too busy."

I ask him about his son. He asks me about my job. Thankfully this bit of small talk dies before anyone mentions the miserable weather outside.

A few rows in front of us a middle-aged woman is having a loud conversation with a younger woman sitting five seats away from her. I'm trying not to follow the conversation, but it's impossible to tune out. To be accurate, this is not a conversation. The older lady is talking at the other, who is occasionally able to interject one-word reactions to this soliloquy. She works at some kind of shelter for rescue cats and clearly feels more protective of them than the average parent of a human child. In describing them they sound more like residents of a nursing home than cats. One is diabetic, another is arthritic, and there's one that stays under furniture that she assumes is clinically depressed. This shifts to the topic of her own health problems and I quickly lose track between human and feline ailments.

Around 9:30 the lady who was collecting information forms walks up to the podium in the front of the room. She welcomes us and thanks us for showing up as if anyone in the room had a choice. After briefly explaining the procedure, she shows a DVD that also explains the procedure and defines a few legal terms like "plaintiff" and "prosecutor" and the difference between "beyond reasonable doubt" and "a preponderance of evidence." There's a rundown of how the "Voir Dire" jury selection process works and what, in general, the judge and attorneys look for when making their decision.

In the DVD they interview jurors selected for a case and alternate between confessional-like shots of the jurors being interviewed and shots of mute reenactments of them discussing evidence and coming to a conclusion. In the reenactments the jurors

make confused hand gestures that get progressively more decisive. The last scene shows them all sitting around a table shaking hands. The jurors all seem to agree that they felt annoyed and inconvenienced when initially called to the case, but by the end believed the experience to be exciting and meaningful.

After the DVD, a judge (with robe and all) takes the podium and repeats everything that was explained in the first half of the DVD and also by the first woman. She then makes us all to stand and raise our right hand for an oath. "Do each of you solemnly swear that you will answer all questions with utmost honesty, and if selected for a trial consider all the evidence of a case as unbiased as possible and without prejudice to render a true verdict according to the law?" We collectively mumble "I do." She explains that today they will be selecting jurors for two trials, one civil and one criminal. "The attorneys will be in shortly to go over the two cases," she tells us.

Forty minutes later a group of men in suits walk into the room and approach the podium, informing us they are the attorneys representing each side of the criminal case. They read from a list of names. Half of the people in the room get called and ushered out into a different room with the attorneys. Among that group was the ailing cat lady. Mike turns to me and mouths "thank god" as she walks out.

Shortly after that, a new group of five suits enter and address us. They introduce themselves and explain each of their roles in the trial. The man representing the plaintiff is large with white hair pulled straight back. He speaks with a deep voice as he explains the basics of the case. He represents the "estate of the plaintiff who is suing a construction company over an unintended fatality that occurred on site," which I guess is

how lawyers say a tragic death caused by a violent accident. He lets us know he'll be calling us up individually to conduct the voir dire in the meeting room next door.

There are about thirty people in the room. The plaintiff's attorney pokes his head out to call in a new person about every few minutes. The room is silent. Mike's reading something on his phone next to me. A man sits cross-legged with a laptop in the corner of the room. The woman in front of me reads *The Wall Street Journal*. I brought a book about sad music. Luckily, I'm the sixth person they call in after waiting little over an hour.

The plaintiff attorney pulls out a chair for me at a table around which the other lawyers are sitting. "Good morning, Mr. Margid--Did I pronounce your name right?" He says.

"Yes, but please, just call me Tyler."

"On your form it says you're in grad school. What are you studying?"

"Creative writing. I'm interested in writing about music and culture."

"Oh, that's cool. What's your favorite band?" he asks.

"That's a tough one, probably Radiohead."¹

"That's some deep rock. Like *deep* lyrics," he says.

"Yeah, I guess so. Do you like their music? Am I allowed to ask you questions?"

¹ Radiohead is not my favorite band* Their music is probably simply the most popular representation of my overall taste, so it's become my stock answer to this question. I do not consider this a violation of my oath.

* The band I listen to most consistently, yet sparingly enough in order to retain the music's sacred essence, is Radical Face. I don't expect most people are familiar with them, so naming them as my favorite band to those who ask would, in most cases, be a meaningless answer.

He chuckles, "Feel free to ask us anything. Have you ever been in court before?"

He asks, without answering my question. He must be very good at his job.

"No. This is my first time."

"Do you follow politics closely?"

"I try to keep up to date with what's going on around the world."

"Do you have any strong opinions on the US immigration policy?" he asks.

"I can't say my opinion is particularly strong. I certainly don't believe anyone should be limited by where they happened to be born. At the same time, I do believe that the government has a responsibility to monitor people crossing its borders. I think the system to register citizens needs to be reformed so anyone who uses public resources can also pay taxes, and immigrants shouldn't have to fear deportation if they need to go to the police or hospital. I don't know how or the extent to which they should limit access, or if they even need to at all. I think it ultimately comes down to a question of how many people this country could sustain. I don't know the answer to this; I just haven't researched enough to do this complex issue justice. My only opinion is compassion and human rights should be at the center of any policy."

One of the attorneys sitting at the far end of the table puts his pen down, leans back but doesn't say anything. The plaintiff seems satisfied with this answer. He reads a list of names, people who will be called as witnesses in the trial. I tell him I don't recognize any of them.

"Do you have any concerns about serving as a juror in this trial, or any questions about the responsibilities of that position?" he asks.

"I do have a concern," I tell him. "I'm very skeptical of the notion of free will."

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t believe people are directly in control of their actions in the sense we normally talk about free will as the ability to do anything within the laws of physics.

“I believe that everything is a matter of the biological and genetic material we are born with, and the physical and social environments we are raised in. We have no control over either of these two influences, and yet everything about our lives and who we are stems from them.”

“That’s interesting. So you don’t think people are responsible for their actions?” asks the plaintiff.

“Not in a traditional sense, I guess. I still want to live in a world where there are consequences for someone who commits a crime, but I don’t believe there’s anything someone can do to stop themselves from committing a crime if they are unfortunate enough to inherit a criminal’s disposition, for whatever reason.”

“Some people are born to be criminals then?”

“Not so much as a predestined thing. There are many environmental factors throughout life that could push a lawful person to commit a crime, or the other way around. They just don’t have control over those factors either.”

“But there are choices in life, decisions we make for ourselves,” he insists.

“I agree, but the choices we make have to do with innate or acquired preferences. I don’t believe we have much say in how our preferences manifest. For example, I like Mexican food, but at no point in my life did choose to like it. If I go out to eat and choose a Mexican restaurant over an Italian restaurant, I can say I made the choice but in reality, I was simply acting on a naturally developed or innate taste in food. Real freedom would

be the ability to consciously decide to suddenly like one type of food over another type. Then you could freely decide to eat anything, but that's obviously not how it works."

"Ok, but what about free thought? If all our actions start from mental processes of the brain instructing the body, shouldn't we have the freedom to change our actions by changing what we focus on?" he asks.

"I don't think that's how consciousness works either. Thoughts just appear in our head spontaneously. You can't try to think a thought, because just by telling yourself to think of something, you're already thinking it. It's only that the thought gets narrated mentally in your language and in your voice that creates the illusion that *you* thought it. To say we have freedom of thought is to claim you have the ability to not imagine a green elephant in any way when you hear those words."

"So, in a court situation, you wouldn't be able to declare someone guilty or not guilty because the conditions of their guilt lay beyond the control of the individual?" he asks.

"That's correct, sir."

"Then through no fault or flaw of your own, I must declare you unfit to serve on a jury... And I guess that's just the way it was meant to be." He hands me a slip of paper excusing me from jury duty. I'm able to go free, or at least, able to leave.

Dear MTA,

Your cigarette breath bridges our faces in this shared personal space. I hope that if our shoulders brush together in a moment of oblique, sliding connection between two human bodies, you will understand I intend the most gentle touch. What I mean is live slow. Blink, with patience. Desire, with endurance. There is nothing about this moment more dear to me than sharing it with you. Slow, slower. Ever slower. Be still.

Ty Segall and the Freedom Band

The Capitol Theatre

Around seven on a warm Saturday that is just turning brisk and windy, my friend Ally and I walk into Taqueria La Picardia to get some dinner before the show. It's a funky spot that shares ownership with the Capitol Theatre across the street. Black and white pictures of Jerry Garcia and other Grateful Dead iconography are mixed about the Mexican decor of the compact, ten-table restaurant. After ordering I notice at a table over Ally's left shoulder a group of long-haired guys. The nearest facing me is blond with a colorful Patagonia fleece and looks exactly like Ty Segall. I look up a picture of him on my phone and show Ally to confirm he's the same person sitting across from us. She's skeptical at first, but as the group of guys is getting up to leave, we walk over.

“Excuse me, are you Ty Segall?” she asks.

He chuckles and says, “Yeah, you caught me.”

“I'm a big fan of your music!” I say. “We'll be at the show tonight. Have a great set!”

We shake hands before he ducks out the door with his band.

Ally and I scarf down a couple tacos then head to the venue. Before we can cross the street, a short man approaches us.

“Have you welcomed Jesus into your life?” he asks.

Before I could politely say we're not interested Ally blurts out “He's an atheist Jew. He doesn't accept Jesus as lord and savior.” This is probably payback for an ill-

advised comparison I made earlier between New York and her home state, Massachusetts.

The man hands me a pamphlet titled *When You Come to Jesus* which advertises eight benefits of adding Jesus to your life such as “he helps you in every trouble” and “all things work for your good,” with the relevant biblical quotes as proof. “It doesn’t matter what you believe. God’s love blesses everyone,” the man says with a kind smile. The statement strikes me as confusing and contradictory to what I understand is the official evangelical message, but I appreciate the friendly sentiment behind it. Thank God the crosswalk sign changes, granting us safe passage to the theater.

It’s still a few minutes before the opening band starts, so we go to the bar attached to the venue, Garcia’s, where they have local bands play on nights when the theater isn’t booked. The Capitol is a legendary fixture in Grateful Dead history since they played 18 times in a one-year span between 1970 and 1971, and, according to *Songwriter*, “many fans think those shows were some of the best the band ever played.” Bassist Phil Lesh also played a string of shows there and was basically the house band right before retiring from touring in 2014. All around the deep, red walls are photos of The Dead on stage, in the green room, or under the marquee.

The opening band comes on promptly at 8. It’s not a sold-out crowd, but the theater is comfortably filled with people dispersed about the floor. The band is a trio that looks like Nirvana if Kurt had dark hair. The guitarist is wearing a grungy, loose fitting sweater and torn jeans, but torn in a way that seem more Good Will than designer label. I’m envious of his Stratocaster, which looks like a custom job with high end pickups that snarl with overdriven tone.

Between sets, Ally and I go out to the smoking section to spark a joint. Two women walk past us and there's a metallic clang as one of them drops a small pipe. It's the size of a palm, teardrop shaped and has a rotating cover so none of the weed fell out when it hit the ground.

"That's the coolest little thing," says Ally. "Good thing it's not glass."

"Isn't it great? I just bought it online for ten dollars." She replies and introduces herself as Joy. Her friend is Elaina. They look to be in their 40s with narrow wrinkles and slight hints of gray in their hair. Joy is wearing a dark denim jacket, Elaina is in a cream sweater.

"Has the opening band gone one yet?" Joy asks.

"Yeah, they sounded great" Ally tells them.

Elaina pulls out her own pipe and small bag of weed. Hers is glass and bright pink. "I like to smoke my own stash," she says with a wry smile.

When I ask how they heard of this show Elaina points at Joy, "She brought me. She keeps me from getting old and boring."

Joy takes a hit. Then exhaling, she says, "I love this theater! They bring in great acts and the crowd is always friendlier than anywhere in the city."

I couldn't agree more. Getting high with these two middle-aged women before a rock concert on a Saturday night, in this moment I have no doubt I am living my best life.

Ty Segall's music sounds close to what you'd get if Syd Barrett had been a member of Black Sabbath and they all moved to southern California. It's psychedelic surf rock. He's only 30 but already put out more albums than The Beatles. In the past decade, he released

twenty studio albums, more than thirty EPs and singles, and played on two of the seven FUZZ albums. His newest release, *Freedom's Goblin* is a 19-track double LP that came out the end of January. In a *Pitchfork* review, Stewart Berman calls this Ty Segall's "*White Album* moment," and says, "On his excellent and ambitious double album, the tuneful sensibility that Segall has been nurturing for years has fully blossomed, all while keeping his primordial spirit intact." The album features a cover of Hot Chocolate's "Every 1's A Winner" that has been getting a lot of plays on the college radio recently and Segall performed one of his new songs on late night *Daily Show* spinoff, *The Opposition* on Comedy Central.

Ty walks onto the stage with his band but doesn't look out at the crowd. He straps on his Hagstrom guitar. He makes direct eye contact with the drummer and plays the opening riff to "She," one of the songs on the new album. A mosh pit forms in front of the stage. The audience is diverse in age but in average young. A couple of the moshers look like teenagers, and some gray-haired guys sip beers toward the back.

"My knee hurts, but if you want to go in the pit, I'll watch from here," Ally says.

In the pit bodies are bouncing around, crashing and pushing off each other. It's chaotic fun, and the band's pulsing rock riffs keep the energy level on high. There are a few girls in the pit, which is atypical but not unheard of. One of them gives me a strong shove in the back, sending me into the mass of bodies compressed at the foot of the stage. If someone falls, they just hold up their arms and the closest people grab them and yank them to their feet so no one gets trampled. After a few songs though, the moshing lets up a bit because there are weird vibes going around the pit. There's a large guy in a white t-

shirt who has been shoving people on the outside of the pit and who have no intention of moshing.

I go back and find Ally, just as Ty starts playing “My Lady’s on Fire.” We dance through the song. After she says “I want to go out for a cigarette. Come with me?”

Back outside in the smoking section we start talking to two high school students.

“It’s crazy how almost everyone in our school is into pills these days,” says one who has glasses and thick, curly hair, and is wearing a superhero t-shirt. “We just stick to the natural stuff though.”

“There’s a correlation,” says his friend. “The kids who do the good drugs listen to good music. The kids who do pills just listen to dubstep and EDM crap.”

Ally finishes her cigarette and we head back in. The mosh pit looks to be back in full force, but we watch the rest of the show from the tame, middle section of the crowd. Ty finishes the set with a medley of Grateful Dead covers. He starts with “Franklin’s Tower,” that shifts to “Fire on the Mountain,” then finishes with “China Cat.” He comes back for a two-song encore of “You’re the Doctor” and “Girlfriend,” which are some of his post punk, noise material. The pit is a wild riot of sweaty bodies and flailing limbs.

After I go up to the merch table to get the new record on vinyl. One of the girls from the mosh pit is there looking at the t-shirts.

“That was really fun. You were going hard in the pit,” I say.

“Yeah, it was,” she agrees. “I’m 25; moshing at rock shows is one of the few things that makes me feel like a carefree teenager again.”

I know the feeling.

Dear MTA,

Where do all the rats go when they die?

Pink Talking Fish

The Capitol Theatre

What I believe draws people to Pink Floyd's epic 1979 concept album *The Wall* is its ambition. It's a virtue that is universally admired. Overambition is a different thing. It's appreciated, but not exactly engaging. I've seen Roger Waters perform *The Wall* at a Hartford arena and at Yankee Stadium. The massive shows had over-the-top production that made it more of an operatic experience. With jumbo screens to see every whisker on Water's salted chin, projected scenes from the movie shown against a massive tower of white bricks that stretch the length of the stage, a giant inflatable pig that flew out over the crowd, and larger than life marionettes of the school teacher, mother, wife, and court judge loomed from behind the wall.

The opening band is still finishing up their set as I walk into the theater. I'm with my friends Ally, Katlin, and Matt, and we walk out onto the floor together to watch. Matt and Katlin are actually more of Ally's friends, since I met them through her. She went to school with them at UConn, and they've been a couple for over six years. Ally is always comparing us to them— "maybe someday we could be like Matt and Katlin." But they seem to me more like best friends who live together than a couple in love. I don't think I've ever seen them kiss, but the dynamic seems to work for them.

The opening band is Consider the Source, a New York based trio that plays eastern/middle eastern influenced rock instrumentals. The guitarist on the left plays a double-neck guitar, both are six strings, but the top neck is fretless and has the slippery resonance of a sitar. The bassist on the right plays a regular four string with rapid thumping ease, often providing melodic counterpoint to the guitar.

After a jam rambles to conclusion, the guitarist approaches the mic. He thanks the half-full theater for coming early and listening to their set; they have just one more song. They start into a psychedelic riff with bouncing arpeggios played with a healthy dose of flanger effect. They change the riff with different patterns and tempos like trying on different outfits for the chord progression. This goes on for about ten minutes. A portion of the crowd starts walking away from the stage to get in line for drinks before the rush between sets. The bassist starts pulling away from the band, and they start comping around his solo. His lines drop in rapid thundering beats with impressive speed and precision. He tilts his head back with eyes closed in the classic stance of a rock soloists pulling the music out from the ether and bringing it to us through their instrument. The guitarist and drummer fade out and watch where the solo goes. Fingers pace rapidly across strings, moving from low to high and back through scales played in a smooth sweep of his picking hand. It's a move known by advanced guitar shredders, but I've never seen someone pull it off before on a bass without a pick (though I should say I don't know much about playing bass). He eventually quotes the main riff and invites the band to rejoin him in the song. They go back into the main theme for a bit. Then randomly start playing a theme I recognize from the Star Wars soundtrack. The drummer takes a solo. Thirteen minutes later they end that one last song.

Between sets I pick up on a sense that there are two general fans amid the crowd. There are those who are here as Pink Floyd fans, and those that are Phish fans. This became clearer as Pink Talking Fish got into their set. They start with the first two tracks from the wall ("In the Flesh?" and "The Thin Ice") and the theatrics are impressive with lighting and projections that shot into the crowd. Then they played a Phish cover and half

the crowd went nuts while the other half bobbed and swayed along, embracing the silly, virtuosity of the Phishy jam.

The two halves of the crowd seemed to unite as the classic “Another Brick in the Wall Part 2” inspired a jam that led to Talking Heads’ “Burning Down the House.” Animations of David Byrne doing his jig, rotating his elbows so his hands go from hips to shoulders were projected around the theater. In the crowd people danced, watched, or held their cell phones toward the stage; but everyone, in their own way, very much into it.

It must be said that *The Wall* is an epic double album, almost an hour and a half played start to finish. An epic album turns into a massive album when played by a live cover band that likes to add on ten-minute jams to every song. A massive album turns into a marathon when that live cover band also covers two other bands and interjects some of those songs, also with extended jam sessions.

Each song had its own flavor, but the pattern started getting repetitive as the solos seemed to run out of ideas and just repeat themselves faster and faster. The band played tight, and the covers were spot on, down to the microphone rant that drones through “Waiting for the Worms,” which the singer had printed out and orated as he paced the stage strewing the script as he read it out into a megaphone. But by then it was around midnight and the crowd had depleted noticeably. Those that remained were treated to a perfect cover of “The Trial,” which the band acted out theatrically. When they finally got to playing “Outside the Wall,” there were more photographers than fans crowding the front of the stage. Matt and Kaitlin had left shortly after “Run Like Hell.” I walked with Ally toward the exit, and from the coat check desk I heard them start into an encore with

a cover of Rolling Stone's "Loving Cup." It was 1:30, and while I appreciated the band's endurance, it seemed like the audience had their fill.

Dear MTA,

I'm sitting across a young woman with a basil plant in her lap. She looked so concerned about the pale green leaves, stroking them with her fingers. "We must consume what we truly love," I say to her, "otherwise it's just a fling." She looked at me and I could feel the weight of pity in her eyes. "You must be a poor lover" she says to me. "I could teach you of the subtle deaths that haunt your every heartbeat. But first you must tell me everything you learned and lost since the first time you orgasmed." I would have done it too. Except, at that moment, a group of businessmen on the other end of the car break out singing and we all found ourselves lost in their song.

And Nothing Hurt

If you want to understand quantum physics, a good place to start might be listening to Spiritualized's new album. For those of us who aren't theoretical physicists, it's difficult to imagine existing in two states simultaneously. The contradiction of this most confounding phenomenon invokes cognitive dissonance. The album *And Nothing Hurt* makes the concept a little clearer because it is built entirely on such contradictions, and if you listen to it while either falling in or out of love, you might find the music of *And Nothing Hurt* reflects your situation directly. Jason Pierce (AKA J. Spaceman), who wrote and recorded the entire album solo in his home studio in England, has hinted that this will be the final Spiritualized record. This uncertain finality resounds in every track of his latest (and possibly last) record of this project that started in 1990 and involved 20 musicians through those years. It isn't only romantic ambivalence either. Pierce sounds more indecisive on this record than Joe Strummer singing "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" The main difference between these British rockers is that Pierce isn't asking any questions about which he should choose; he's demanding both options at once.

When the album dropped in the Autumn of 2018, I was feeling a similar kind of limbo in my relationship with Ally. We passed the two-year mark. Despite how close we had become, how many good times we shared, we were starting to get on each other's nerves. My focus was split between writing for grad school and commuting to the city for work; I wasn't giving her the attention she deserved. Things started so quickly with all the concerts and events we were going to, it was all bound to settle down eventually, and

when they did our time together felt more stale. I would go over her apartment a few nights a week, after a full day of working in Manhattan, writing on the train, typing it up at my home in Stamford, driving 20 minutes to her place where we developed the same routine of having sex, drinking, and watching Netflix on her bed. It wasn't bad, just tiring. When a few nights a week turned into just weekends, she lost patience first.

A Perfect Miracle

The first track of the album deceives listeners right from the title. What could be better than a miracle? A *perfect* miracle, that's what! The song blooms open with softly strummed B major progression in a triplet time signature. All the highs have been cut from the tone so that it sounds like the guitar is underwater. These chord changes are highlighted by reverberating chimes from a xylophone that bring to mind Doppler radars. Interestingly there's contrary motion between the two instruments. When the guitar drops a 4th from B major to D# minor, the xylophone goes up a 5th from B to F#, which is the minor 3rd of the D# minor chord. The contrary movement in the harmony makes the chord changes sound like they're fluctuating between bright and dark moods, neither happy nor melancholy, but bouncing back and forth between the two. Before Pierce sings the first lyrics of this album, listeners already have a sense of being pulled in two directions at once. It's easy on the ears and shows off Pierce's ability to produce clear, studio quality recordings in his own home. And he uses his talents to overlay his voice so that the listener hears both the love song and the disillusion at the same time. But the track is inundated with the building of orchestral strings and horns that nearly drown out

both of Pierce's voices. The noise of the larger picture diminishes this internal conflict to insignificance and we understand this relationship may be doomed, in the way all things are subject to atrophy and are doomed. But not just yet; the album has only just begun.

Ally tried talking to me about her concerns that we were drifting apart. I tried to brush them off. I was busy, but it was only temporary. When I was done with school, things would be different. She called me one evening, and her voice had the thin quality of someone who had just finished crying. She told me she invited a man up to her room, some random nurse who happened to work at the clinic across from her place. She told me they hooked up, but she couldn't go through with it and made him leave without having sex. I felt betrayed and empty inside. But I also understood her reasoning that she only did it because I was leaving her feeling insecure and lonely. Because she didn't try to hide it from me, I believed that she wouldn't do it again. We could still recover from this and get back to how things used to be.

Here it Comes (The Road) Let's Go

Ten seconds of static waves (or are they particles?) go in and out like fumbling for a clear frequency on the radio start this track off. The static fuzz blends into a synth that oscillates between D major and E minor while a twangy guitar plucks blues licks over the chords. Pierce begins singing "Hey baby it's alright/ You can come to my house tonight/ I'll give directions here/ A couple of hours and you'll be near," and it sounds like we're in for a good cruising road trip ballad of reuniting lovers. Listening to this song reminded me of those nights driving to Ally's apartment after a long day of working and writing.

The son's driving 4/4 rhythm bounces us between the tonic D and dominant G major 7, there's a growing sense that something is missing. The narrator singing to the driver seems to be both there and not there. What was left of me sitting behind the wheel, drained emotionally and mentally after all those hours? What could I have left to offer her when she'd open the door to let me in? The choruses again use the overdub tracks for a call/response effect, which blurs the lines between voices: "Here it comes (here it comes)/ the road let's go (turn on)/ The radio (let's go)/ As far as we can go." At first it seems the first voice leads the second, but then it becomes more of a dialogue and it's entirely possible that the driver and singer of the verses is the same person.

This comes clear in the final verse's instructions to "Leave the car by the broken gate/ Cut the engine pull the brake/ Take a stroll along the path/ You'll find my key beneath the mat." No one is home, and this traveling love song ends in solitude. Maybe this is the state of modern romance--it's all in our heads. How well do you really know your lover? You've observed and interacted each other throughout the length of a relationship, long enough to puzzle together a concept of the whole person. But how accurate can we be with all these roads between us? Is it possible that person you love is a projection created in your own head, one that differs significantly from the image they have of themselves they keep in their own head? Was it possible that time had warped the memories of Ally in my head with that special, glowing filter or nostalgia? The harmonies Pierce sings in the chorus of this song come together to form unified lyrics. But, in the end, both voices are his own and he is only using the collective pronoun to sing about himself.

My relationship with Ally did recover for a little while, despite friends outside of the relationship warning me it had become toxic. In a long phone conversation with Jess, she said “the decision is ultimately up to you if you can forgive her, but consider what it says about the kind of person you are if you can overlook this kind of betrayal. I just hope you to choose whatever you think will lead you to be happy.” I still loved Ally, and I knew we had been happy together. Perhaps our relationship was just going through phases like any natural cycle, and if there was a chance we could find the road back, I thought we had something worth saving.

I'm Your Man

By this track, we are no longer fooled by Pierce's hypothetical tone when he sings “I could be faithful, honest, and true/ Holding my heart for you.” We know from “A Perfect Miracle” that when he *would like to* or *could* he is really just admitting that he *isn't*. The chords harmonizing these lyrics subtly suggest this failure by shifting from the tonic C major to the submediant A minor. This change sounds like a sigh of disappointment because aurally the tonic always wants to go to the dominant, in this case G major. C major has the notes C, E, and G. The C grounds the chord but the G, the 5th, sounds like it's leading the chord. A minor (A C E), drops that G but keeps the C and E, only now C is the minor 3rd of the new root A. These underlying chords suggest Pierce's hypothetical desires to be “dependable all down the line / devoted all the time” are merely wishful thinking. Despite all evidence, I thought I could make things work with Ally. It seemed

so easy in my head, if only I could will myself to be that mental version of the person I thought I could emulate.

The truth surfaces in the chorus where we do get a change from C to G major 7. This more powerful harmonic movement stands behind the pronouncement “But if you want wasted, loaded, permanently folded/ doing the best that he can/ I’m your man.” He sings these words forcefully with unsparing self-criticism, so we must believe him.

There’s an interesting lyric in the second verse “I’m waiting for a sign from you/ I could be honest, constant and true.” Whoever the “you” is in this song seems to insist on the chorus qualities, holding Pierce back from the virtuous verses. With the ambiguity of the previous track, we cannot rule out the possibility that “you” is self-referential and Pierce is his own obstacle. The fact that he is recording and producing this album solo adds to this solitary sentiment. Even more so, the qualities in the chorus and verses aren’t entirely contradictory or mutually exclusive. Someone can be wasted, faded and uneducated and also be loyal and honest; the only difference is where the focus lays. A person can be both self-centered and faithful, no different than molecules behaving as both particles and waves. Ally and I fought towards the end of our relationship together, and it was bringing out the worst in each of us. Her drinking got destructive; I started cutting myself, a habit I had stopped almost a decade ago. I gave in to the guilty relief that came with the sensation of opening up my skin, and the airy feeling that followed as the blood left my body. It became clear that if we couldn’t help pull each other back up soon, the relationship would tear us both apart.

Let’s Dance

This is the worst song on the album, but there's reason to believe it was written that way intentionally. Within the first four bars listeners are greeted by the second most rudimentary chord progression only because it varies the progression by returning back to the root chord, which, by design, makes the progression feel even more redundant rather than more diversified. A dinky sounding piano traces over this bland harmony with arpeggios that go up and down like lulling waves so that you understand how Pierce feels when he sings "Though I'm tired just sitting here talking with you/ There's better things y'know a lonely rock 'n roller can do." Listening to this part as my relationship crumbled, I understood why this might be the final Spiritualized album. This project that started as an experimental indie band somewhere between prog-rock and post-punk psychedelic and explored building simple folk songs that swelled into oversized orchestral compositions has run its course and come full circle. Dating Ally was invigorating, full of exploration and excitement, but ultimately not sustainable. There is an admission that Pierce wants to do more (whether musically or perhaps even in a larger "what is the purpose of life" kind of sense) than this band has amounted to, and yet here we are listening to another Spiritualized track that builds upon a circular harmony up into two minutes of chaotically triumphant orchestral white noise.

Even the rhythm of this song evokes a sense of weariness with an adagio 4/4 meter carried by a repetitive percussion that features a lot of shakers and sleigh bells. This choice of instrumentation reinforces the quantum notion of many particles, from the bells down to the grains of sand in the shakers, all combined to form a single beat.

Listening to this song evokes a feeling similar to the dilemma the field of physics faced in the wake of the Higgs-Boson particle “discovery”. Physicists such as Sean Carroll and Harry Cliff talk about this pesky particle as a bittersweet discovery/confirmation of our understanding of the physical world. They predicted its existence, spent 40 years and over 13 billion dollars looking for it. They did find the particle that behaved and interacted with other particles in the exact manner, except the mass is a quadrillion (!) times smaller than their calculations were showing it should be. They knew about this discrepancy before (known as the hierarchy problem) and were hoping the discovery of the particle would shed light on why it is or if there were extra particles. They found nothing. In the field of physics, there have been no enlightening discoveries since the 70s. Everything they have found had been previously predicted and/or showed us nothing new about physical reality. Surely some of the brilliant minds in this field must be thinking there are better things to do.

Ally and I were also thinking there might be a better way, and decided we needed a break from each other. We hypothesized that maybe some distance would. That lasted about a week before we started texting again. Just checking in, at first, but then we thought it might be good to try hanging out “as friends” and meet up to go bowling.

On the Sunshine

All these contradicting states of mind and matter are piling up fast by now. This last track on side A doubles the tempo of “Let’s Dance,” and feels like the most chaotic song on the

album so far. The harmony has a IV-I resolution which has an ambiguous quality because the submediant is the next neighboring flat key to the tonic. It sounds nostalgic to move backwards on the circle of 5ths. The lyrics reinforce the sense of frustration that has mounted with all the contradictions. Pierce's voice sounds worn and raspy as he sings "You can take the monkey from your back/But the circus never leaves." We can go on living life pretending these contradictions don't exist, it probably wouldn't affect our daily lives to believe the world operated on classic notions of Newtonian physics, but then we would have to live knowing this concept of reality is blatantly false. We can't go back or forget what we know to be true.

This track also ends with an orchestral build-up. The last two minutes of the song are a prolonged cacophony of horns, strings, guitars, keys, and Pierce chanting over and over, "State of mind." What started as a song about a glorious new day has turned into a frustrated lament of the unending cycle of days piling up and leading to nowhere. And that's where the needle stops on side A of this record.

Damaged

In many ways side B starts off opposite to how side-A ended. The tempo is slowed again, this time way down again, this time to an adagissimo 4/4 meter. And instead of G major, this song is in D minor. There's a settling feel to this change. A descending melody goes down a minor pentatonic scale, A-G-F-D, punctuated by lazy slaps of a snare drum.

Pierce sings in a low moan, "And I/ Wanna just close my eyes/ Feel like I'm living/ Feel

like I'm alive." If "On the Sunshine" was a fast-paced race to where nothing is real, "Damaged" is a lethargic search for something true.

The final verse of the song mirrors the first with another contradiction. Pierce sings "And I/ Wanna just take my time/ Feel like I'm broken/ And I'm laid out and dying." It sounds like he is not convinced as to whether he is alive or not, and furthermore, not sure which state he'd prefer. It's a proper break up song because each of the three verses resolves, "Darlin' I'm lost/ And I'm damaged/ Over you." This returning notion of "you" remains as ambiguous as it was on the first side of the record, but the sense of alienation and loneliness here is undeniable.

This is another song that ends with a multi-layered build-up, but all the chaos has been quelled (Pierce even drops this line in the third verse: "Quell the cavalier child.") but the sense of pushing for something more remains as strong as ever. A guitarist solos over the minor harmony with wavy notes that bend up and down a full step a perfect fifth above the chords in background. This has the opposite effect of the IV-I resolution in the last track because the 5th (mediant) is the root of the next sharp key in the circle of 5ths. While that had a nostalgic effect, this is more anxious and searching.

Sail on Through

If you've been paying attention, you probably guessed that this is another slow track. It opens with a steady thumping bass and some swelling, ambient sounds. On the downbeat a guitar strikes a half-diminished chord that has some heavy reverb effects. There are no

drums for the intro and first verse, but a click-track keeps a steady rhythm. A guitar amp rings out feedback like there's a tear in the song and it's threatening to rip through. Pierce sings in a dispassionate, almost speaking tone "I tell no lie, I tell the truth/ You know I just don't need to be with you."

This song is like a soundtrack to giving up. Just like in the first song, we have the hypotheticals: "If I could hold it down/ I would sail on through for you." This time we know that the hypothetical is invoking the impossible. Pierce will do no sailing. But still, there's a curious line in which he speak/sings "I'll hold on tight, I'll hold on true/ Was the best thing I could do for you." The mixture of future and past tense, and the willingness to push on, contradict the rest of the song. It's a hopeful tone in an otherwise dejected soundscape. But that doesn't make it any less real.

Physicist like Sean Carroll and the late Stephen Hawking have been vigorous supporters of the many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics, which implies that every possible alternative histories and futures are real and no less valid than this one. There is a world in which this relationship is built to last, and maybe we've just drawn the short straw and are stuck in the one in which it's futile.

And in their many worlds maybe one of those I could have been happy with All. We could have lived in harmonious syncopation and been happy together.

The Prize

In the intro to this song, we get the reverberating, doppler-like xylophone that started the first track, and there is a sense that we've come full circle. We're in C major, and a guitar

plays another descending lick A-G-F-C. That final drop of a 4th to the root gives a sense of finality. Pierce sings in a dreamy tone “Time/ Lends you a shotgun for a while/ Gonna be shooting like a star across the sky/ Gonna burn brightly for a while/ Then you’re gone.” We’re at the end of the record, and there seems to be no judgment as to whether the journey was good or bad. The only thing that matters is that it’s done. What was the point of it all? I don’t know, and neither does Pierce, who concedes “I don’t know, dear/ If love will live or if it will die/ And I don’t know if love’s a lie.”

In the end, I wish I could have been a better boyfriend for Ally, the kind of guy she deserved to be with, who would share their life with her and love her with endurance. I couldn’t be that guy, and to continue pretending was only hurting us both. Maybe there’s some parallel universe out there where we are that perfect couple who can share good times going to concerts and inspire the best out of each other. It sounds crazy to me, but no crazier than any other theories involving quantum physics. I’ll believe it’s possible because scientists much smarter than me say it’s so.

Dear MTA,

It's always dripping. Even with no rain, still the gray drops parade down to the greasy platform. Please don't tell me where this funky liquid flows from. The eddy between the tracks of an uptown Q train teems with oily rainbows under a mist of beady flies. I fill my glass with the house wine of the 2nd Avenue station. Let the putrid quaff coat my tongue as I toast to the health of the Bowery.

Aubrey Haddard

Rockwood Music Hall

The Rockwood Music Hall is such an understated venue, I walked right passed it the first time. There is no sign--certainly no marquee--only a decal on the glass door and a framed chart of upcoming shows let you know you've come to the right place. The bouncer is slightly frail for the job, but his bald head gives him enough of an authoritative air. He checks my ID and tells me to be sure to get the one drink minimum at the bar.

It's a little past 7 on a Thursday, the second slot act is setting up. I grab one of the empty stools up at the bar and order the requisite beer. There was a modest crowd when I came walked in, about fifteen people in a room the size of a studio apartment. Everything about the place fits every stereotype of a classic SoHo piano bar. The band setting up looks like every Nirvana inspired high school garage trio. But the stage is a small corner of the club and is dominated by a grand piano with flakes of wood showing from under its worn black paint. The drummer sets up off stage to accommodate it like an unmovable monument.

"What are you drinking?" asks a young woman who takes the empty stool to my right. I tell her the type of beer and she orders one for herself. She introduces herself as Leah and tells me she works by union square and edits documentaries. She just finished one about a 90-year-old holocaust survivor who plays in a metal band. It's set to premier at the SXSW film fest this spring. She says she has discovered a few gems of local talent here, and likes to come by on some Thursdays. The first band starts to fill the small club with their sound-check, Leah and I have to resort to passing notes on a napkin to communicate. She asks what I keep writing in my notebook. I tell write back that service is better if the bartender thinks you're a *Time Out* writer doing a review of their place.

The band introduces themselves as “Expert Lovers,” which may or may not have made my eyes roll. I wonder how many good band names could be left for them to settle on that. But as they get into their first song, I’m impressed. The guitarist shows a deep vocabulary of chords, and his solos are neat and to the point. There is no more than a couple dozen people, but feels like a crowd on the small floor. Everyone is bobbing and nodding with the music, which sounds in step with the post-punk, alt rock movement--very much in the company of bands like Death Cab for Cutie and Minus the Bear.

Between sets I go to use the closet-sized bathroom in the corner adjacent the bar and the stage. It’s lit by one dim, red bulb and further darkened by black walls and ceiling. And I truly feel sorry for women or anyone who has to sit, because the entire toilet is glossy black and barely distinguishable from the black floors. I use the toe of my shoe to lift the seat.

When I get back to the bar, I see Leah has finished her drink, and to be friendly I offer to get the next round. People eddy up by the stage trying to talk to the band as they haul off equipment. Leah says this is a good turnout for a weeknight, which seems about right to me. In a venue this small, five more people would make it feel packed, while five fewer would feel starkly emptier.

Aubrey Haddard comes on and does a quick sound-check with her bassist and drummer. She looks washed out in the red lighting because she’s wearing a red shirt and playing a pink Stratocaster, which brings the focus to her freckled face and dark bangs. She fans herself and remarks on how steamy it has gotten in the small club. She has dark crescent moons forming under her arms to prove it. I move closer to the stage and spot a tattoo just above her left elbow that says “ALL I HAVE IS MY LOVE OF LOVE.” The

room has filled out considerably, putting it somewhere between 80 and 90 percent capacity. The crowd is also considerably more female too since the Expert Lovers herded their dude friends to drink at the annex bar next door.

Aubrey starts straight in with a jazz chord progression played with a syncopated rhythm that alternates between a root note which she plucks with her thumb and the rest of the chord played with her fingers. She then breaks into a throaty Norah Jones croon, with the wavy modulation and all.

The crowd sways with the music, some with eyes closed, some taking video with their cell phones. It seems like everyone not ordering a drink is enrapt by the music. Aubrey plays with just the neck pickups on her Strat turned on and the deep bass tones fill the room with thick sound. I almost feel like everyone here should be smoking French cigarettes and drinking fingers of amber liquid.

After her set, I go up to the stage and tell her I thought she sounded great and sign up for a mailing list for next time she's playing in the city. Pointing to pins on my jacket, she says "I like your buttons." She reaches into her gig bag and gives me a white pin with a sketch of her hugging her pink guitar. I thank her and say "I like your Bowie tattoo!"

Leah and I go to the annex bar next door. The bartender there asks about the set, and when I make the Norah Jones comparison, he tells me Norah used to play Rockwood in her early days. She sat at that old piano that's still on the stage. On a night like this, I choose to believe him.

Dear MTA,

The hour of rush pushes us closer. The sweat of our skin forming ionic bonds between atomized lives. We stand together, tighter than the shirts men wear in Hell's Kitchen bars. We may jostle, but not one of us will fall. I feel your sigh. I taste your impatience. I wear these sunglasses for your protection.

Elvis Costello & the Imposters

Capitol Theater

March 8, 2018

I'm not too proud to admit that I sometimes go to rock concerts with my mom. Together we've seen The Who, Roger Waters, and Flaming Lips. I credit (or blame) her for my music taste since the days she would play Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin for me while I was in the crib. Now that I'm older, it's often my role to introduce her to new bands.

Neither of us are huge Elvis Costello fans, but when my mom was in college, she was friends with a gay guy from the Midwest who was. Driving to the venue she tells me how she would go over to his dorm, smoke pot and listen to his Elvis Costello records. "Oliver's Army" was one of 20 songs on a playlist that ran on an infinite loop at the grocery store I worked at as a teenager.

We get in line to go through the security pat down under the marquee. A guy who looks to be in his 50s complaining about "these goddamn millennials and their puffy Canada Goose coats. This is New York, not the Arctic Circle. You don't need to stuff your jacket with dead animals to stay warm." He nods at me for confirmation, "am I right?" The temperature is just below freezing and he's wearing a North Face fleece over a flannel shirt. I'm the only one in sight who looks younger than the internet, and I'm wearing a denim jacket.

I've been to many concerts at the Capitol, but the shows I go to aren't seated and I always buy a general admission ticket. Tonight, we have seats up in the balcony, so we head up the stairs. A college-aged usher leads us to our seats in the row second from the top and all the way to the side. For the first time I truly get a sense of how large the

theatre is. Patterned blue lights are onto the walls like electric wallpaper. Far below us the floor audience sit in arrayed seating. This is the first of three nights Elvis is playing here, and there's only one or two empty seats in the back of the balcony.

No opening act--Elvis, wearing a black suit and sunglasses, leads his band onto the stage. He picks up a red hollow body guitar from a stand in front of the drum riser and flashes a wave at the crowd as the drummer counts off the first song. The sound is muddy in this far corner of the theatre, the bass rattles about even after the audience and building have absorbed the treble. But the band seems to have good energy and would sound much better if our seats were more centered.

The keyboard player dominates the whole left side of the stage as he rotates from keyboard, to grand piano, to synth station, to Hammond. He threatens to steal the show with every solo he takes. His playing is so tight and precise, it sounds like he has an extra hand. Elvis sounds his age, but sings with such passion that sounds better than any studio recording I've heard of him. There is audible desperation when he cries out "I'm just a soul whose intentions are good/Oh Lord don't let me be misunderstood." His voice a syrupy baritone with a wide vibrato, nasal at times and a tendency to curdle into an aural sneer. He's backed by two female vocalists who fill the higher range and add a sharpness to the vocals.

Elvis is just as loose with his pitch as he is with the rhythm. The songs are all common time, but he seems to push the tempo at times, like he's either too excited impatient to wait for the beat. Only during the fast-paced song, "I Don't Want to Go to Chelsea" does he seem breathlessly trying to keep up. The drummer keeps a simple beat, unadorned by flashy fills, and lays a rhythmic foundation that's easy to follow.

This becomes more noticeable in the second set, which is nine songs with no rhythm section. He opens with “Allison,” accompanied by only the two vocalists, who watch him and try to guess at when the beat will drop. His between-song commentary turns political in this set with a no-so-veiled stab at Trump. After the song he asks the crowd “is it too late to announce my candidacy? Nah, I can’t run anyway. But I have two American born sons, so watch out! Their ol’ dad has even written them a campaign song.” He takes to the grand piano and starts playing “Blood and Hot Sauce.” After an hour of a rocking, up-tempo first set, this drum-less folksy blues set feels like the show is bleeding energy. From the back of the balcony, I see a steady trickle of people leaving their seats to go to the bar or bathroom. Elvis says “this is the hour of the evening I like to don the old smoking jacket, throw another log on the fire, and sing the hits of the new wave.”

The keyboardist comes back on stage to play “Shot with His Own Gun.” It’s clear he’s been playing with Elvis for a long time because he seems to have a natural sense of his fluctuating rhythm. The two are so tight, it’s hard to tell who is leading whom.

The third kicks it up again with a scratchy sounding electric guitar. The people in the first few rows get up to dance and clap along. Even the band seem to be having more fun, trading solos as Elvis introduces the band through the song “Every day I Write the Book.” They close with “What’s So Funny Bout Peace, Love, and Understanding?” A question that seems less rhetorical today than when Elvis sang it in 1974.

Dear MTA,

These delays are an illusion since measurable time can't afford a Metrocard. But still the crowded platform carries an air of frenetic impatience. My nerves are charged like a third rail. A woman on the Brooklyn stands with a phone pressed to the side of her head. She makes me nervous. There is a black hole between her lips. I wonder if the person on the other side of the line is aware her right foot is tapping an inaudible beat.

Jamrock

818 Windsor St. Unit-C Hartford

A week after breaking up with my girlfriend, I find myself up near Hartford hanging out with a girl I dated in college. “Do you like free jazz?” Rachel asks.

“Sure, that’s the only jazz I can afford these days” I say.

Not deigning to laugh at that joke she says “Luke took me to a free jazz show the other night. We got there and I saw the saxophone and upright bass, and was genuinely excited to hear some jazz. But they started playing, the sax was making all the sounds that a saxophone should never make, and the bass was doing this completely other thing like they weren’t even playing together. It was literally noise, and I was truly upset by the time it was all over. How could anyone like that? Explain yourself!”

I say that while I don’t listen to a lot of free jazz, my very basic understanding of it is part of the avant-garde movement of the last century that led music away from diatonic keys and towards tonality. It follows from the philosophy that music doesn’t always have to sound beautiful, and that dissonance can be just as valid use of expression as any strong chord resolution. It’s not so much about good or bad music and more a matter of making meaning out of chaos and improvisation.

“So it’s good because it’s objectively bad,” she concludes.

Rachel tells me about an event going on in Hartford with a bunch of local bands of various genres playing in an industrial warehouse. I recall one of the reasons we broke up was because she didn’t like going to live music with me.

This became clear one night in the city, we were going to see a local band play at Arlene’s Grocery, but as soon as the opening band went on, she started begging to leave.

We sat outside on a bench on Houston St. The loud, cramped basement venue had triggered a panic attack. The sirens, traffic, and all the people walking by weren't helping, so we took a train back to Connecticut and watched a movie instead.

Tonight, though, I figure with a long list of acts, there will be short sets to keep her from getting bored of one band.

Since we broke up, three or four years ago, she decided monogamy isn't for her and started openly dating multiple guys. In the Lyft to the venue she says it works for her because she has no plans to start a family. The only downside is that guys don't take the relationship as seriously, and she feels like some of them would prefer to be her only guy -but settle to share her rather than lose her.

She asks me about my recent ex-girlfriend, "What color hair does she have?"

"Brunette, like yours," I say.

"Good. I don't like people with blonde hair," she says.

"That sounds like a kind of racism," I tease.

"Maybe reverse racism. Most minorities have dark hair."

The Lyft driver takes an exit off the Highway, but we're nowhere near downtown Hartford. We're in an industrial area in the North End. The buildings are mostly dark, not many windows face the street. A group of guys smoke on a stoop. We pull into a block of brick warehouses. "What part of Hartford is this?" Rachel asks. "The dark hair part," the Lyft driver says before letting us out and peeling away. Two people are smoking by a door, which we find is the entrance to the venue. It's almost 11pm and we just missed the band So Sorry, which looked like it would be the highlight of the acts, but a woman who says she plays Brazilian folk songs is setting up her keyboard.

The warehouse stretches about 50 feet deep and 30 feet wide with a low dividing wall running the long way. Colored lights rotate around the brick walls which have been painted white. There's a mess of plastic tables and folding chairs shoved into a corner. The keyboardist sets up on one side of the dividing wall while a crowd of 30 or so mill about on the other side. I assume it was more packed for So Sorry's set.

We go over to the far end of the room where a makeshift bar is set up with some bottles and a mini-fridge sitting on top of a plastic table. I get a beer for myself and a cocktail for Rachel from a bored looking bartender.

The piano player starts. She's pale with long, hair and wire rimmed glasses and singing a mournful sounding ballad in Portuguese. Her voice, deeper than I expected from her slight frame, seems to fill the warehouse with a dark air. Candlelight would be more fitting than the tacky, tawdry party lights that strobe and spin against the walls. The music swells in bursts of cascading arpeggios that fall with increasing intensity. In the valley of silence between the song and the applause I feel like I need a hug. She plays three more songs, ending on one in English about the unity and love, and sings it with convincing passion, bellowing over a rush of chords and buoyed by the natural reverb in the warehouse.

Next up is a rapper called Anne:Gogh. She's wearing oversized green sneakers, a white jacket that looks covered in graffiti, and round, reflective sunglasses. She raps over a pre-recorded beat with a rattling drum machine. She has an easy, lazy flow with repetitive precision. On bouncing knees, she paces the stage area on the other side of the low divider, pivoting, high-stepping, and strutting with the beat.

At the end of her short set, one of the guys who has been working the sound board starts passing around a bag of orange earplugs. This doesn't strike me as a good sign. I don't even catch the name of the next performer, who is a lanky, pale guy with long black hair, because loud buzzing and screeching sounds blast from the PA system. Rachel and I head for the door.

"That was terrible, how could anyone do that to people?" She complains, then adds, "by the way this is exactly how I felt about the free jazz."

This seems like an unfair comparison. There is nothing artistic about inducing hearing damage on an unsuspecting audience. From outside we can still hear the anti-music like there's heavy construction being done inside. Intermittent screeching and pounding sounds shake the metal door in its frame. It sounds like dubstep on bath salts in there. There's no beat or rhythm, no attempt at harmony, and no mercy for those poor people inside until it finally dies down and is safe to reenter the building.

The last act of the night is a hip-hop artist called TANGSAUCE, who invites the crowd to join him on the other side of the "divisive" wall. He's wearing a silver/gray suit, sunglasses, and black gloves. He also sings over a pre-recorded backing track. Rolling his shoulders with swagger, his lyrics reference specific parts around Hartford and New Haven and speak to social justice with overtones of acceptance and positivity. On his last song he picks up a trumpet and blows up and down a minor pentatonic scale with a swinging, syncopated rhythm as a hip hop beat plays behind him.

It takes a while to catch a Lyft back to Rachel's place. It's a stale lam. Two rides cancel on us as they got near. Rachel shifts and tugs in her pea-coat, she smells like baby powder. We finally get picked up, brought back.

Dear MTA,

I've heard complaints that the MTA needs public restrooms. Clearly these people don't realize the beauty of having public transportation that's modeled after a sewer system.

Just look at the grime coagulating on the tiled walls and the leaky vents dripping ungodly fluids with an odor that lingers in the nostrils like a bad pop song stuck in your head.

There can be no question that these are the intestines of the city that keep us moving, pushing forward with (quasi-)regularity. The homeless know and thus are able to urinate and defecate without shame; this is how they let us know we're in their territory.

Winter Night / Pyrrhon

Gold Sounds

Taking the L from Manhattan out to Bushwick for a death metal concert, I realize I'm not looking forward to this night at all. I had some food truck falafel for lunch earlier, and the uneasiness in my stomach is making me start to regret it. On top of that, I have not been a real fan of metal bands since a particularly awkward phase from when I was about fourteen to sixteen.

Ally and I were officially broken up, so I was open to dating again, but wasn't sure if tonight qualified as a date. I was invited to this show by Krista, a young woman I met at a funk show in Queens. One of her friend plays bass in the band Pyrrhon, which is the second of three bands on the bill. As I walk up to Gold Sounds, some guys in black shirts and long, greasy hair are wheeling amps in from the curb. I know I'm at the right place. Inside, the bar looks like any typical New York dive bar-- dusty mirror behind the bar to make it look like there are twice as many half-empty bottles, a sign on the wall that warns "your bullshit will not be tolerated here." What distinguishes Gold Sounds from other Bushwick dive bars its death metal theme, which just means it looks half-heartedly decorated for Halloween. A tiny skeleton hangs over the cash register. The dozen or so patrons here look like extras on a set of *Sons of Anarchy*. Almost all the guys have long beards and every person in the bar is wearing some kind of black t-shirt, though some have sleeves torn off.

My phone vibrates with a text from Krista: "I had a tattoo appointment that ran late. I'll be there soon. So sorry." There is a happy hour from 4-8 when beers are \$5, but the kegerator is broken so the options are limited to whatever bottles and cans they have.

Krista arrives shortly, wearing a studded leather jacket and black t-shirt. She went to one of the CUNY schools and, to her apparent surprise, a group of her college friends have also shown up at the concert. She tells them that we are on a date, which answered that question for me. After introducing me to her friends, one of whom apologizes in advance for a string of personal questions she says she intends to ask later, I buy Krista a beer and we go sit at one of the small tables by the door.

Her face is very pretty--freckled cheeks and dark bangs. She has dark skin and amber eyes.

“People have trouble identifying my ethnicity. Most of the time they just assume I’m whatever minority is most common in the area. When I lived in California, people called me Mexican. In New York people often assume I’m Muslim and Middle Eastern,” she says.

“So, then what do you identify as? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“My mom came from Barbados. My dad was from Lithuania... He just passed away a couple months ago.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry to hear that. Were you very close?”

“We were. That was the first time I lost someone close to me. It really changed the way I think about death, and how I value life. That’s why I started volunteering at the cemetery on weekends.”

“What’s that like?”

“Meditative,” Krista says.

She keeps glancing over my shoulder at her group of friends, which is starting to make me nervous. “Are you hungry?” she asks. “I should probably eat something if I’m gonna drink more tonight.”

My stomach is still a little uneasy from lunch but offer to go with her when she says she wants to get a snack from the bodega across the street, which ends up being a pack of two small donuts. She calls me a gentleman for paying the \$1.75.

Heading back into Gold Sounds, I suggest we check out the opening band in back. So we pay the \$10 admission, get a hand stamp, and pass through the soundproof door.

The opening band is called Winter Nights. I can tell because of the banner hanging behind the drummer, but also the bassist is wearing his own band’s t-shirt, which features a vulture standing over a corpse of an animal with pointed horns.

“This next song” the singer growls into the mike, “is about watching your enemies die and pissing on their graves.” The two guitarists start playing a fast-paced, galloping riff, their guitars tuned down to at least a drop D. The drummer follows them with a pounding double bass, punctuated with snare and crash cymbals. The singer barks some unintelligible lyrics with one leg on a stage monitor and leaning out towards the crowd of 20 to 30 people in the small room. Krista’s friend John, who is the bassist in the band on next walks up to us and offers earplugs from a jar.

I’m surprised by how good the band sounds. They have some complicated rhythms that switch mid-song, and the lead guitar solos in a tone and style comparable to Joe Satriani’s sporadic and spacy shredding.

“This next song is called ‘The Pleasures of War.’ It’s about shooting from the hip,” the singer says still using his demonic voice impression. “And if anyone wants to do

some shooting of their own, we have shot glasses for sale.” He points over to the merch table.

After the set, Krista and I go back to the table. “What do you do for work?” I ask.

“I organize archives for an art gallery near Columbus Circle. It’s a pretty good job, but my boss is this old French prick who is always yelling at his employees and showing off the gallery to his mistresses. I get great health benefits though. I’ll stick it out for another year or so, then look to move to a different gallery.”

“Do you have any weird kinks or fetishes?” she asks.

The question catches me off guard. Before I can answer, she says, “The last time I went on a date, the guy had a weird fetish for wigs. He had decent natural hair, but he told me about his collection of wigs he likes to wear and was saying that I would look good in a wig. Needless to say, that’s the last time I spoke to him.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not into anything like that. I think you have beautiful hair,” I say.

“Thanks. Do you like camping?” She asks.

“Yeah, sort of. I haven’t gone since I was about 15 though. Do you?”

“Not at all! I am a great indoorsman. Don’t get me wrong, I love nature and being outside when I’m awake. But I need four walls and a roof to fall asleep,” she says. “My parents fled oppressive countries so that I could sleep inside. It’d be disrespectful to everything they sacrificed if I didn’t take advantage of it every night.”

“That makes sense,” I say, mimicking her ironic tone. Burst of muffled sound seeping in from the other room indicates that John’s band has started soundcheck, so we head over.

Soundcheck for a death metal band is a funny scene. The lead singer practices different kinds of yowls. He has a multi-effect pedal that distorts his voice into humanoid sounds. John has already taken his shirt off and screams into his mic while rapidly thumping his bass. Without the visual context, one could be mistaken for being in some circle of hell, which for a death metal band, that might be a compliment.

John's band is called Pyrrhon. He says they play "experimental and technical death metal music." I assume it's a genre related to math rock bands like Chon and Animals as Leaders, which uses complex time signatures and intricate tapping patterns on guitar. These bands make music that is so fast and intricately layered that it almost sounds like chaos, but all comes together with an overarching order and groove.

Pyrrhon has no such groove. The sound blearing from the stacked amplifiers is pure chaos. Maybe it's the small venue to blame for poor acoustics, but the sound a cacophonous blur, an assault of noise. Just trying to follow the drummer is difficult because he's changing the beat often. This stretches the very definition of what can be considered music. John thrashes at his bass, tapping the fretboard and intermittently screaming into his mic. He could play anything he wants and I doubt anyone except maybe the other band members would notice.

The first song ends. "Thank you," says the singer. "We've got a couple more for you." I adjust my earplugs as they start the next barrage. Krista leans back against me, and we try to find a consistent beat we can move to together. The song is completely indistinguishable from the others. Luckily the singer is true to his word, and they only play two more songs.

“It’s not like me to leave before the headliner, but I have work tomorrow. Do you wanna get outta here?” Krista asks.

We say goodnight to her friends and head for the subway together. It wasn’t much like a typical first date, we seemed to have covered everything from sex to math to death, and I even met her college friends. All things considered, it could have been worse.

Dear MTA,

Outside of Grand Central's Vanderbilt entrance I passed by a young man juggling and frowning. The sign by his feet said "Juggling, Struggling. Food or Change. Or Just Smile." He looked like he once was a beautiful man with his angular face and capable hands. But his face had acne scars and his clothes were dirty. I realized then that this man was more human than any of us could hope to be. We all spend our days performing ridiculous tasks that eat away our identities so that we might not starve. We are all frowning jugglers.

I Am Only Human

I am not a luddite, but I probably would be if I weren't so damn lazy. It seems most of the times when new technologies emerge, they present great and novel conveniences in the short run, terrible unforeseen consequences in the long run, but ultimately get adopted as inevitable steps in human progression. Cars, for example, must have seemed an ingenious way to transcend all the inconveniences and inadequacies of the horse-drawn carriage. It became possible to travel far greater distances, not to mention the maintenance. Fast forward to the present and transportation is the leading cause of carbon dioxide emissions (29% according to the EPA website), which currently represents the greatest existential threat to humanity. I'm not saying we should all go back to horse-based transportation, but it's possible that if the car industry hadn't been so successful, we could've built infrastructure suited to public transportation or other methods travel that could have been more sustainable. It's hard to imagine what that would look like, but only because how ubiquitous cars have been throughout history since their invention. Still, it'd be nice to envision modern cities where public space wasn't crammed to crowded sidewalks so we can make way for four lanes of traffic. Imagine walking across 42nd without getting stuck behind a gaggle of tourists, gawking and selfie taking, or a phalanx of a family holding hands in an impassable chain across the length of the sidewalk.

It's hard to see the effects of our latest gadgets when they arrive. The immediate benefits are effectively marketed in the language of pixels and processing speeds. I wonder if we'd be more cautious about accepting them as a part of our lives if we were privy to the total costs and effects— if cell phone companies had to market their

products like drug manufacturers and list all the side-effects of using their products.

Warning: the new iPhone may cause families to stare silently at their hands while sitting around the dinner table. I can see why this side-effect manifests itself. Why talk to dad about his day in the office or ask mom about her reading club when the entirety of human knowledge is available in the palms of your hands? There's just no competing with the company of the internet. It has better jokes than your funniest friend and greater insights than your wisest mentor.

Even though that's a common sight-- we've all seen it when walking into a restaurant, an entire table of people sitting in silence, no one's gaze reaching further than the edge of the table where they hold their rectangular object of fascination angled towards their slightly bowed heads like a reverent, wordless grace --we² might be tempted to judge. Their fascination with whatever is on those glowing rectangles appears a one-way vacuum tunneling their attention into a void of impersonal feedback.

I got on the iPod bandwagon in 2004 because it was easier than carrying around my gaudy, yellow Sony Walkman and bulky CD binder. I never got into the later versions with their color screens and superfluous apps. I just needed something that could turn the tower of CDs I had into a 4'' by 2.4'' device that I could just carry around in my pocket.

² If you, the reader, feels like I'm using the royal we here to implicate you in my own petty, judgmental view of technology and those who seem to have an unhealthy obsession with it, you're absolutely right. Whether or not you actually share this critical view with me is your business. I just need to feel like you're on my side on this, because as isolating as it is to be absorbed into the faceless world of backlight screens, it is utterly depressing to feel like the only one at the table looking up at the bowed heads around you and feel like the only one yearning for conversation with another human. So please indulge me, reader, in pretending you're at this table not staring down, but willing to make eye contact and engage with me in a moment of pure human interaction.

It was nice being able to go anywhere and take with me my entire music collection. It was the first device I carried around with me, still a couple years before I got my first cell phone the winter after I started high school. Since using my iPod, my relationship with the music I owned³ changed remarkably. I knew all my albums by track number, would listen to them consecutively. The first CD I ever bought was Linkin Park's *Hybrid Theory*, and getting to know that album was a slow expedition that took a week before I finally listened to all twelve tracks. Now there's so much music coming out all the time I'd go broke trying to keep up. These days I (regrettably) use Spotify because entire albums are available on the day they get released. I listen to them on my commute or at work and usually have a judgment on it by the end of the day. There's no personal investment of time or money, and the only recent albums I develop a real relationship with are the ones I get on vinyl.

When I did get my flip phone, a very basic thing, as they all were at the time, with a black rubber trim around the edge that made it durable enough to play hacky sack with. I felt the power of instant communication, but it was clearly a power I was not yet responsible to handle. Having access to my friends 24 hours a day was not always appreciated from a teenager with insomnia. I cringe recalling nights I've kept my friends up for hours talking about nothing, just keeping them awake with me because I could.

About halfway through college I got my first smartphone. It did everything I needed, from email to Facebook. Six years later, I'm on my third smartphone. They seem to last less time before battery life starts to dwindle, or the operating system

³ To the extent that anyone could really "own" the music they buy.

malfunctions. I need a special adapter to use headphones, which is unjustified for any reason other than pure consumer exploitation. I often find myself pining for that original phone, which cost almost nothing, because that was back in the day when phone plans came with upgrades before they realized that they could make people purchase new phones simply by manufacturing them to last just long enough for the next generation to come out.

I'm convinced they call it generation Z because it's plausible to imagine they will be the last generation of fully biological humans. Everyone feels comfortable making fun of millennials, and probably for justified reasons.⁴ But I've never heard anyone make fun of generation Z, and my suspicion is that we are all terrified of them. I grew up in a time when computers were just hitting their stride in getting adapted to daily life. The late 90s became defined by the dot com bubble and Y2K hysteria. But I don't remember any of that, because I was too busy playing outside with my friends. Even though we spent many hours in front of a TV playing Nintendo, it was generally a social activity. I would bike over to my friend Ryan's house to play Smash Bros or Tony Hawk's Pro Skateboarding in his basement together. And yeah, on sunny summer afternoons his mom would pop in and harangue us to go play outside in the woods or jump on the trampoline, with the same tired mantra about "rotting our brains out." So I'm not assuming the

⁴ Unless, of course, you are one of those devoutly postmodern millennials reading this. In which case, there is probably nothing wrong with your worldview. Don't you ever let objective facts override the validity of your personal subjectivity. Stay woke.

perspective of someone saying how “kids these days...” and “back in my day...” No, my childhood wasn’t ideal, but it seems part of a troubling trend of youth spent indoors.

A 2018 UK study commissioned by the National Trust found that children spend half the time playing outside that their parents did, and it’s easy to understand why. My parents’ generation grew up just before Atari engendered the modern video game console, and they played out in the world far more than my generation. The nature of children growing up from generation to generation doesn’t change, but the contents of their environment does and if my dad had an Xbox in his room growing up, I’m sure he would’ve spent fewer hours playing pick-up games of baseball with the other kids in the neighborhood. Believe me, I think it’s awesome to have increasingly advanced and entertaining video games. It’s genuinely impressive that the latest FIFA soccer game isn’t immediately distinguishable from a real televised soccer match. These developments seem inevitable since Moore’s laws states that computer processing power doubles every two years. And since 1970, when that “law” was first popularized, that paces has been increasing at exponential rate.

I’m not saying we should be content with slower computers. I still get frustrated when a slow internet connection takes a minute to load a webpage. And I’m certainly not against having cooler, more immersive video games. But perhaps we could do a better job at understanding the effects these things have on our society in terms of how we interact with each other. Online gaming started getting popular in the early 2000s. I know this because in middle school and high school I had friends turn down plans to hang out because they wanted to play World of Warcraft or they had an obligation to take part in a clan raid that afternoon. I’m not gonna say that what my friends online wasn’t

socializing. I will, however, just point out that they were sitting alone⁵ in their room on a sunny afternoon in July when they could have been hanging out with me around town.⁶

In college I went through a phase during which I experimented with spirituality. Though raised culturally Jewish, celebrating the high holidays, eating latkes and matzo ball soup, I begged my parents to let me quit Hebrew school after a couple classes. I was seven at the time, so it wasn't an idealistic stand for rational understanding of the universe through science and history rather than a translated version of one very old book. I simply objected to giving up a precious weekend day to spend it in another school-like setting. My freshman year I found a group of friends who only wanted to talk about consciousness, its limits and ability in manifesting our understanding of the universe. These conversations were buffered by psychedelic drugs and hikes through the woods off campus. We frequently trash talked the use of technology. I'll admit, we went a little too

⁵ Perhaps there is an argument that they weren't in some sense "alone" because they were communicating and (virtually) interacting with other people, albeit people they've never met or spoken to (face-to-face). But they were the sole physical body occupying the space of the room with the computer in their house.

⁶ Here I get that it might start sounding like a more personal jealousy is at work here with regards to my sentiments on the effects of technology in daily life. Like I may in fact be manufacturing a sense of societal doom and existential crisis because my childhood friends would on occasion break plans with me to play online video games. And maybe I would be more "with it" if I had made any effort to try them out for myself. Maybe then I would understand how truly entertaining these games are and how engaged I'd feel with the larger online community substituting time with physical friends for time spend interacting with avatars controlled by people identifiable only by an online username.

far when we started placing crystals around our dorms and studying “Sacred Geometry.”⁷
There is a spectrum here. We can go too far in either direction.

I was hanging out in my friend Kyle’s dorm when I got that text from my girlfriend at the time, Rachael. Later that evening she came by with a flash drive with a documentary loaded on it called “Transcendent Man,” based on a book written by computerphile Ray Kurzweil. She said a professor showed it in one of her programming classes, and it will change the way we think about the future of humanity. The three of us went out to smoke a joint, then sat in front of the TV and prepared to have our minds blown. What I saw for the next hour and twenty minutes filled us with dread, anger, trepidation, and dismay.

This Kurzweil guy is counting the days (and he doesn’t think there are many) between now and the Singularity-- a paradigm shifting moment in technology at which humans will transcend their biological makeup in order to keep pace with technological advancements. We will literally become robots. The implications of such a transformation are vague and undefined, some believe they are literally unfathomable to us since that kind of world will bear little resemblance to life as we know it, and science fiction may only provide shots-in-the-dark hypotheses.

But in some ways, the singularity is already happening to us. I never thought it would happen to me, but that’s just how this kind of thing gets you—you don’t think. Most of the times I pick up my phone, it’s not for any meaningful or productive reason.

⁷ This was a cop-out for me because I found real geometry, or any discipline in mathematics frustratingly hard to learn, and the Fibonacci sequence is far more interesting when one believes it relates to some fundamental construction of the universe than just using it to solve a word problem.

The majority of notifications, buzzes, and dings signal nothing other than an escape from the present moment. I'm taken out of a present sense of boredom, frustration, or dissatisfaction.⁸ My phone has now become an intrinsic part of myself. It would honestly present multiple logistic and practical challenges if I were to leave home without it. Day to day life seems to require more processing power than my little brain can handle, so I outsource the deficit to my phone. I keep my schedule in my Google Calendar, look up definitions to unfamiliar words, check and send emails, texts, train times, song lyrics, tweets from journalists I follow, how many novels did Kurt Vonnegut write?⁹ And what year did the NYC subway system begin operation?¹⁰

I don't have anything personal against robots; I even like the majority of them. They know more about me than I know myself. Spotify's algorithm reliably has better band recommendations than my most tuned-in friends. Robots understand complexity and I can respect that. Every day is an exercise in trying to behave like them: programmatically reliable and predictably efficient. But I don't enjoy being treated like a robot. Maybe that's where I get uncomfortable with their increasing ubiquity in daily life. We make them try to act more human-- with robocalls on the phone making all their hmms and uhs, little traces of the imperfect human brain interfacing with language-- but perhaps all this

⁸ For example, numerous times while writing this essay I have stopped to pull out my phone to check tomorrow's weather, or the score of the Mets game. These checks were entirely unessential to my task of writing. They were the definition of absent minded. I can't justify or explain why I needed that unrelated information at that exact moment except for that I didn't know how to write the next sentence, and my phone was there to provide a convenient distraction from having to immediately confront that problem.

⁹ 12

¹⁰ 1904

time they've also been making us more robotic. The human part of me that feels the anxiety of their infiltration most acutely is the sentimental side-- the part of me that understands what it means to lose something we can never get back.

The truth is I get jealous of them sometimes. They can obviously do things I can never do. They can outperform me even in the things I'm best at. Ray Kurzweil built a robot that composed a piano sonata; I've never done that. For conversation, I mentioned to my girlfriend the other day that I read a *Vice* article about a company that manufactures sex robots. We're talking about things 1,000 times evolved from your classic blow-up doll. They look every bit human¹¹ and have the ability not just to speak, but to communicate, reading facial expressions and making "eye" contact. My girlfriend said "that's just wrong. People are willing to buy robot sex slaves!" I asked her how different is that from the vibrator she uses to masturbate.¹² The difference, she said, is that there is no mistaking the fact that she is using a vibrator when she does it. In the case of these sex robots, there is an actual attempt to fool guys into believing they are actually fucking a woman--one that is unnatural and made to look like some kind of cartoon porn star.

¹¹ If you can overlook the freaky, uncanny valley part.

¹² I know how this looks in terms of male sexual insecurities and just mentioning that I get jealous of robots and all. I swear there was no resentment-based motivation for instigating this conversation. I honestly don't mind if my girlfriend uses mechanical assistance to orgasm when I'm not around. Honest.

This could just be a personal issue,¹³ but I get uneasy, awkward feelings when I look bored in public. Showing up early for something was less of an issue for me before I quit cigarettes because there's nothing awkward about standing outside and looking around when you're smoking a cigarette. But if I were just standing outside and looking around, visually doing nothing else at all, I feel like my idleness sparks suspicion in people passing by who look busy or at least tasked with specific direction/intention. I don't mind having nothing but my thoughts to occupy me, in fact I find it quite restful having the luxury to reflect and ruminate. But when I'm in the subway with no book or my journal to busy myself with, I find I don't know what to do with my eyes. There's nothing to see in the windows but the blackened bowels of the city and my own transparent reflection staring stupidly back. All the safe, no accidental eye contact zones are occupied by inane advertisements. I get a weird sense of peer pressure to take out my phone and reread old text conversations.¹⁴ I sometimes wonder if other people are doing the same thing (i.e. looking at their phone just to have a place to look).

No one's really sure what it means to be human¹⁵, but I think we can all agree that any alternative is not ideal. Even the obvious fact that humans aren't perfect does little to negate our essential nature. Sometimes it is our imperfections which make us most

¹³ It probably is.

¹⁴ This feels especially dumb for me since I often don't have service in the subway, so my phone is rendered practically useless for most of its functions. I end up staring blankly at the screen not really knowing why or what I'm looking for. I suppose I could download some games or puzzle apps, but then I don't trust myself, knowing I would be tempted to use these in times when I don't need refuge for my eyes and attention.

¹⁵ I'd be suspicious of anyone who claims they are.

endearing, and indeed most human. I'm afraid of a world in which all imperfections are unacceptable and ironed out, reducing us to simple, predictable, errorless lives. I like how messy life is, how we can love flawed people and love ourselves despite our flaws. I'm not convinced I want to live without my emotional baggage from losing friends and family, or give up my inner fears, anger, and desperation. I'm afraid of what that would make me. This is not an argument for complacency or mediocrity; this is an argument for humanity, for finding it within ourselves to be better rather than outsourcing the solution to another consumer gadget.

Dear MTA,

If I'm being honest, I cannot agree with most people around here who claim that New York is the greatest city in the world. It is, however, beyond a doubt in my mind the most New Yorkish city in the world. The singularity of these five boroughs makes this city feel simultaneously like a simulacrum of the past and the future. We have solar-powered public charging ports, and we have a subway system that runs slower than the horse-drawn carriages in Central Park. I like the phrase "only in New York" because it makes watching a homeless man arguing with a fire hydrant feel like some unifying cultural experience, which it most certainly is.

State Champs

PlayStation Theater

I stopped paying attention to the emo music scene towards the end of high school. My self-absorbed teenage angst started to give way to a more outward-looking sentiment reflected in the indie rock scene of the early 2000s. By the time State Champs formed in 2010, I had already moved on to bands like Arcade Fire, Vampire Weekend, and The Black Keys. Bands such as My Chemical Romance, or Hawthorne Heights may have still been putting out albums, but I was actively ignoring them like a former lover. Their music meant everything to me at one point, but once I shifted towards the indie scene listening to emo only reminded me of everything I hated about myself--my insecurities and unbridled emotions--in the early teenage years. So, I had a strange anachronistic sensation when Jess told me about them and invited me to go with her to an upcoming show in Manhattan. They sounded like a band I would have been really into 13 years ago, but would be embarrassed to listen to three or so years later.

I started with their 2013 debut LP, *The Finer Things*, which is a very typical pop-punk album. It's very safe to listen to, and exudes aural energy with strong drum lines and buzzing guitars at the front of the mix. It's feel-good music that can resonate equally with feelings of lust and anger--the duality of the genre's emotional keys. It doesn't get much deeper than that, and it really doesn't have to. The musical arrangements and lyrics are straight-forward and easily digestible. But that's not a bad thing. You know exactly what you're getting--a mood amplifier. State Champs know their audience, and through listening to them, I understood something fundamental about Jess' interior being, something only revealed in glimpses throughout the eight years I've known her as a

friend. Fans of State Champs are young people with strong emotions and exuberance for the people in their life. They don't need intricate music compositions or cryptic lyrics because they already bring to their daily lives a level of personal engagement that needs no artifice or abstraction to serve as a reflection of their place within society. They may be more indifferent to capital-A Art only because they simply live artfully. Jess could feel more joy radiating from a smile on one of the 4th grade students she teaches than if she were to listen to the entirety of Beethoven's 9th, ending with the "Ode to Joy" chorus.

She told me the State Champs song "Lightning" reminded her of me because the song is about two people who were "misreading every feeling...thinking it was all fun and games" until they discover they were meant to be lovers. I had listened to the song before; it's catchy, but I never thought too much of it. It's a simple Eb major tune in 4/4 with a basic verse/chorus/verse structure. But Jess didn't just hear the music in that song, she heard the entire narrative of our relationship, and now I can't listen to the song without feeling the weight of our history together.

On my way to Grand Central, I stopped by Rockefeller Plaza to watch the beginning of a 24-hour match played by NYCFC fans, hosted by the club and featuring star players and coaching staff. They set up a net around a mini-soccer pitch by the Plaza. I spotted the team captain Alex Ring walking by the perimeter and asked him to sign a NYCFC t-shirt for me. He pointed at the Arsenal hat I was wearing and said in a Finnish accent, "That's a great club."

I asked him what he thought of playing for Patrick Viera, the former NYCFC head coach and Arsenal legend and a key part of their 2003-2004 undefeated "invincible" squad. He said it was an inspiration and a highlight of his career. It sounded like an

answer he had already prepared. I watched the event while waiting until Jess' train was getting in and started walking to Grand Central to meet her.

Jess looked good. She had a black beanie under straightened hair, wearing skinny jeans and Chuck Taylors. She was also wearing red lipstick, a shade that reminds me of her longboarding around campus back in the day. She had an energy about her in the way that she ran up to hug me when I saw her across the main concourse of Grand Central.

It was getting to be a brisk evening as we walked through Midtown. "Know any good dive bars around here?" Jess asked. There's the fairly well-known Rudy's a few blocks from the venue, famous for cheap beers that come with each beer you order. The deal strikes me as suspiciously good, and I try to avoid eating mammal meat, so I opt for a 5-dollar falafel sandwich from a food truck before we go drinking. Jess put her enthusiasm into drinking. I tried to keep up with her for each fireball shot, the way we used to half a decade ago at our college bar, Elmers.

We left the bar a little after 8 and stumbled towards the PlayStation Theater. I wondered if I should hold her hand or not. We never used to hold hands, but so much else has changed about our relationship this year, so why not give it a try? I held out my palm and she laced her fingers between mine and pulled herself closer to me as we navigated the midtown crowds in a swaying three-legged gait.

We had a bit of difficulty getting into the venue because Jess had to download an app to access the mobile tickets. "From now on, you're responsible for getting the tickets," she said, her breath illuminated by her glowing iPhone as she created an account for the ticket app.

Once inside, we went down the stairs, checked our coats, and went into the theater. The opening band, Our Last Night was already on stage. They sounded heavier than State Champs, more classic emo than pop punk. Jess and I went up into the seats rising behind the general admission floor. The band looked small from the back row and the sound muddied as it ricocheted off the wall behind us. It felt like we were hovering above the concert, separate from the headbanging kids below. No one could see us so far back, and no one could hear us over the music, leaving us free to do whatever we wanted.

After the opening band finished their set, Jess said she had to use the bathroom. I went to the merch table to buy her a t shirt she mentioned she saw on the band's website that just had the text, "State Champs of what?" When I met Jess back in the lobby, she looked panicked.

"I can't find my phone," she said. I waited outside the bathroom as she cut through the line to retrace her steps. When she emerged empty-handed, I suggested we check the seats in the back. When we returned, we found another young couple back there. "Sorry to interrupt. I think I dropped my phone back here." The girl pulled out her own phone and turned on the flashlight, searched the ground by her feet, and quickly emerged holding Jess' phone. "Oh my God! I could kiss you right now!" Jess shrieked, fully expecting to go through the rest of the night without her phone.

We went down to the mosh pit when State Champs came on, playing their aggressive hit "Secrets" the single from their previous album. "Wanna go into the mosh pit?" Jess asked.

We moshed through the entire setlist. State Champs never even relented with any of their slower ballad songs, playing banger after banger. When they played “Lightning, we found each other and screamed the chorus together. People were crowd-surfing and I got whacked in the back of the head by someone wearing Doc Martens. We came across a guy wearing a mouthguard. “That guy moshes!” Jess shouted in my ear. The middle of the floor churned with bodies, sweeping me and Jess along and tossing us amongst the chaos like a tumble dryer. Through their entire set, we raged to the music filling the room. I recognized about half of the songs they played, but this music fuels a crowd no matter how familiar.

By the end of the show, Jess and I were covered in sweat, both our own and the sweat of the crowd. We collected our coats from the coat-check, but didn’t put them on when we got outside. The cold, late winter air felt good on our skin and in our lungs, and I didn’t think twice about holding her hand as we made our way back to Grand Central.

Dear MTA,

The problem with suffering is the way it makes you feel special. It draws you up into your skull and locks you there where no one can reach. In that isolation you might discover a sense of entitlement. No one hurts like you do. This is where the MTA provides a vital public service. It reminds us that everyone is suffering. We shoulder the delays and the service changes, united as New Yorkers. I look in your face, flattened by annoyance and see you staring at that same vacant track and know that we together are losing moments of feeling alive. This is the closest possible approximation to collective empathy the city has to offer.

The Last Song

After the show, after any show, there's the unsettling hush. The stage lights darken. The band disappears. House lights illuminate the sweaty, sobering crowd. The oneness shatters like a spell broken. You become an individual again. "Is that it?" you might ask. Few may hopelessly plea for "one more song!" as the roadies unplug amps and coil up cords. It's over. You struggle to pick out your favorite song because they've all morphed into one. That righteous guitar solo, or the chorus the crowd belted in full voice and unison, they all belong to the rapidly waning night. There's nowhere to go but to funnel out into the cold, predawn dark.

There's an afterglow of the music, and that energy follows you. It lingers about you on the subway platform. You make eye contact with people who have the same neon wristband from the venue, their hair usually looking like they just had a two-hour sex-athon.

But the very next day, it's gone. Maybe you took some blurry cell phone pictures to prove it all actually happened. Sure, you might be able to remember all the songs and the faces of the people you met, but the out-of-body sense of belonging to the music and the crowd is gone. The only way to know it was ever real is to wait for the next show.

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