“HOLD OURSELVES TOGETHER WITH OUR ARMS AROUND THE STEREO”: LISTENING FOR WEAK HOPE IN CONTEMPORARY SONG LYRICS

by

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Abstract

It is difficult — maybe even ethically dubious — to be optimistic in the face of late-stage capitalism, the global rise of neo-fascism, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing genocide, and climate emergency. In this dissertation, I argue that listening to and making music can become forms of empathetic resistance to the inertia of personal and collective trauma. I call this listening for "weak hope": realistic, ethical, and active hope that is salvaged and assembled from the margins of conventional sources of strength. I listen for representations of weak hope in the work of five contemporary musicians — John K. Samson, Christine Fellows, the Mountain Goats (John Darnielle), the National (Matt Berninger and Carin Besser), and Taylor Swift — whose song lyrics have informed the vocabulary of my own survival. In so doing, I make a *record* of my own listening, attending especially to the ways in which I hear these songs resonate with scholarly conversations on listening, trauma, and the lyric.

Though I borrow from the thinking and language of scholars working primarily in literary studies, I also develop my own terminology in order to approach song lyrics as audible, embodied works of literature. Attentive listening, which means listening closely and carefully in order to *make* meaning, has both conceptual and methodological valences, as I self-reflexively position my own ear as this project's primary listening apparatus. I am interested in "making" in terms of meaning-making, artistic creation, and survival ("making it"), and argue that the three are intrinsically linked.

Learning to listen — to tend and to attend — to one another is an urgent imperative. I posit that one way to "hold ourselves together," both the collective "ourselves" and individual our/selves, might be "with our arms around the stereo" (the National, "Apartment Story," *Boxer*).

Lay Summary

Amidst the unfolding horrors of the twenty-first century, sometimes it feels weird and wrong to be optimistic about the future. In this dissertation, I argue that listening to and making music can help people find what I call "weak hope" — hope that feels realistic, ethical, and active.

I do this by listening attentively to five contemporary musicians — John K. Samson, Christine Fellows, the Mountain Goats (John Darnielle), the National (Matt Berninger and Carin Besser), and Taylor Swift — whose song lyrics think about and enact what it sounds like to "make it" through and beyond trauma. I engage with scholars working in both literary studies and music in order to approach song lyrics as audible, embodied works of literature.

In writing this dissertation, I've made a metaphorical record of my listening. The process of making this record has, in some ways, enabled me to "make it" through my own trauma.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Bronwyn Malloy. A version of Chapter One has been published as "'Tuned Every Ear Towards a Tiny Lengthening of Light': Listening for Weak Hope in John K. Samson's Winter Wheat." *Canadian Literature*, no. 241, 2020, pp. 75-93. https://shibboleth.gale.com/Shibboleth.sso/SAML2/POST

The quotation that forms part of the title of this dissertation is excerpted from the National, "Apartment Story," *Boxer*.

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Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.
(D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*)

Leonard Cohen once said,
"There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"
and I am not an old man having an existential crisis
at a Buddhist monastery, writing horny poetry
but I agree.
(boygenius, "Leonard Cohen," *the record*)

Introduction

"So hopelessly hopeful":[1] On Listening for Weak Hope

"I have heard them singing each to each, and who's to say that they won't sing to me?" (John K. Samson, "Alpha Adept," *Winter Wheat*)

This is a dissertation about hope. In particular, this dissertation is about how listening attentively to song lyrics can become a form of empathetic resistance to the inertia of personal and collective trauma. In the face of late-stage capitalism, the global rise of neo-fascism, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing genocide, and climate emergency, learning to listen — to tend and to attend — to one another is an urgent imperative. I posit that one way to "hold ourselves together," both the collective "ourselves" and individual our/selves, might be "with our arms around the stereo" (the National, "Apartment Story," *Boxer*).

In this project, I listen with close attention to five contemporary musicians — John K. Samson, Christine Fellows, the Mountain Goats (John Darnielle), the National (Matt Berninger and Carin Besser), and Taylor Swift — whose lyrics have informed the vocabulary of my own survival. My intention is to make a record of my listening, attending to the ways in which I hear these songs resonate with scholarly conversations on listening, trauma, and the lyric. As the chapters progress I move gradually from listening to artists sounding collective crisis, to artists sounding individual trauma, to artists who have enabled me to listen to and sound my own trauma. In configuring this project as a record of my own listening, I am both writing back to these lyrics and inviting the reader to listen along — to these songs, to and with my increasingly emergent self, and, most importantly, to themselves.

[1] the Weakerthans, "Exiles Among You," *Left and Leaving.*

There are three primary conceptual threads that run through this thesis and bind the chapters together: weak hope, listening, and making. In each case, though I borrow from the thinking and language of scholars working primarily in literary studies, I also develop my own terminology. The language I use — what Samson, the subject of Chapter One, might call "new words for old desires" ("Left and Leaving," *Left and Leaving*) — emerges partially from my training and positionality as a literary scholar, and partially from the lyrics themselves. Listening attentively, for me, means listening with care and open receptivity. Rather than marshalling my listening and writing solely along and between the existing lines of scholarship, therefore, this thesis is shaped, organized, and enlivened by the lyrics that it listens to. In this way, I position my work less as an intervention and more as an offering, a late, weak ode to what I believe is the vital practice of attentive listening to the often-overlooked literary texts that are song lyrics.

In this introduction, I begin by unspooling the three major threads (a metaphor borrowed from Fellows, the subject of Chapter Two) that run throughout the chapters. In the process, I speak to my evolving methodologies for close reading and listening and gesture to the theoretical conversations that this project listens to and participates in. I then situate this project within and against the nascent field of literary song lyric criticism. Finally, I introduce the bands, the musicians whose work forms the beating heart of this project, and sound the notes of resonance and dissonance that I hear between them as artists, collaborators, and individuals. So, as we begin, let's "lean in close" to our record players. "This is what the volume knob's for" (the Mountain Goats, "Dance Music," *The Sunset Tree*).

Weak Hope

The first conceptual thread — what Swift, a subject of Chapter Four, might call an "invisible string" (*folklore*) — of this dissertation is weak hope. Hope is a capacious, slippery word. The *OED* defines *hope* as the "[e]xpectation of something desired; desire combined with expectation." I am mainly interested in the kind of hope that that is rife with desire but stripped of expectation; more of a "hope against hope"[2] than a dreamy optimism, naiveté, or entitlement. I call this "weak hope," a late, recalcitrant hope that does not come easily, but is made from the salvage[3] of crisis and despair. As opposed to more common sources of hope that rely on imagined expectations of pleasant futurity, weak hope is cobbled together from unlikely and unexpected places, assembled from the margins and wastelands of conventional sources of strength. My concept of weak hope arises principally from my ongoing work on Samson.[4] Samson's poetics and politics have been a major influence on me as a writer, scholar, listener, musician, and activist since I first discovered his music almost twenty years ago, when he was the lead singer and lyricist for Winnipeg folk-punk band the Weakerthans. In my undergraduate honours thesis, I wrote about the Weakerthans' four studio albums, and in my MA thesis, I wrote

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[2] The *OED* defines "hope against hope" as, "to hope where there are no reasonable grounds for doing so."

[3] My use of this term is influenced by Samson's and Fellows's 2007 song "Good Salvage," which itself borrows from John Dryden's second prologue to *Secret Love* (aka *The Maiden Queen,* 1667).

[4] Samson has more recently been going by the name John Samson Fellows, which adds Christine Fellows's, his wife, last name to his. Since Fellows is also one of this dissertation's primary subjects, however, I use "Samson" for continuity and clarity throughout.

about Samson's first solo album, *Provincial* (2012).[5] In Chapter One, I listen to the ways Samson's 2016 album *Winter Wheat* resounds with weak hope.

Chapter One also demonstrates how I hear weak hope resonating with other scholars' thinking on complicated affect, including Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007).[6] Berlant and Ngai both engage with the complexities of experiencing and seeking out beautiful, positive feelings such as optimism while the world literally and figuratively burns around us. For Berlant and Ngai, hope is an ugly, cruel affect because it is nearly impossible to articulate or enact an equitable optimism. How do we advocate and agitate for a more equitable world without centering our own interests and desires? Is it even possible to arrive at a collective vision of a better future? How do we insulate activism from toxic positivity? An equal concern is the way advocacy stripped of optimism can quickly slide into listless cynicism. Optimism can be punishing; it is a demanding and sometimes thankless task to do the imaginative work of articulating hope. Holding out and onto hope can be heavy.

I combine *hope* with *weak* because, like Samson, I locate potential in things, people, and places that are often considered "weak" and therefore overlooked. There is radical, realistic hope to be found in small, quiet acts of resistance and organization. These faint strains of hope — or what Samson calls "tiny lengthenings of light" ("Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*) — are salves against the corrosive apathy of despair. While there are instances of literary scholars taking up

[5] I even have a Weakerthans-inspired tattoo — the lesser-than symbol (>) — on my wrist.

[6] Coincidentally (as far as I can tell), the front cover of *Ugly Feelings* is illustrated by Winnipeg artist Marcel Dzama, who also provided the cover art for the Weakerthans' 2003 album *Reconstruction Site.*

ideas of weakness across the discipline, most are concerned with Keatsian readings of Shakespeare's "negative capability,"[7] Samuel Beckett's search for a "syntax of weakness" capable of expressing an "authentic weakness of being" (Barry), or Kierkegaard's "despair of weakness" (330) in *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness unto Death.* In each case, *weak* remains a largely negative descriptor, and weakness is seldom considered as a potential site of resilience or recuperation. In this project, I am interested in the affordances of weakness more than the limitations, for a *limitation* inherently suggests a spectrum of possibilities.

Attentive Listening, the Listening I, and Echolocation

The second theoretical thread in this thesis is attentive listening, which has both conceptual and methodological valences. Emerging primarily from twenty-first century French scholars, theories of listening think through the ways in which we listen and thereby make meaning(s). Taking cues from mid- and late-twentieth century theories of reception, Jean-Luc Nancy's *A l'écoute* (2002)[8] posits the *corps sonore,* or sonorous body (7) as one that enables sound to echo, or resonate, in a self-referential cycle. It is by this process, which Nancy terms *renvoi* (return, referral, 36)*,* and its cycle of "feedback and return" (Hudson par 4), that meaning may be derived from auditory intake. Nancy's conception of aural signification directly involves the listener in processes of sonic meaning making. For Nancy, the ways a sound resonates in either an individual's body or the body politic determine how the sound will signify: an audible

[7] See especially Kuzner and O'Sullivan.

[8] Translated in 2007 to *Listening* (Mandell).

sign does not "make sense" (68) to the listener until they quite literally *make* sense of the sound. In this way, attentive listening is always already interpretive, creative, and facilitative.

Of course, not all bodies resonate the same way. The same year that Nancy published *A l'ecoute*, Vijay Iyer published an article, "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music" that productively complicates Eurocentric assumed universalities of embodied listening and musical cognition. Iyer persuasively argues that embodied listening is inextricable from culture, and that music cognition is "situated," noting that while "every music listener has a body…every culture 'constructs' the human body differently" (388). In fact, listening might even be considered a *weak* interpretive mode, subject not only to the limitations and differences of our situated hearing bodies, but also interference, lag, distance, and echo. Our bodies are permeable and porous organs of hearing, and our listening apparatuses and meaning-making processes are subject to misprision and misapprehension. I argue that the very weaknesses of listening, however, are also sources of its greatest potentialities. Listening is an act of care and attention that is necessarily creative and interpretive, and the porosity and flexibility of the listening body make it a fascinatingly dynamic site of production. In other words, perhaps, just as "To err is human,"[9] so too might it be human to listen. While listening is a diversely embodied and enacted process, in my understanding it is also a metaphor – you don't need to be able to physically *hear* in order to listen. Many members of the deaf and hard of hearing communities, for example, listen to, make, and study music, experiencing its resonances and reverberations in their bodies and making meaning from what they feel.

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[9] Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism.*

In her work on embodiment and the ethics of listening, Annmarie Mol attends to the phenomenological and narrative (re)construction of the body that happens between the speaker and auditor. While Mol is a medical anthropologist working primarily on the problems of listening in clinical contexts (especially how people with marginalized bodies, such as women of colour, are seldom listened to), her broader thinking around embodiment has been influential on my conception of the listening body as porous and liminal. In an article "Embodied Action, Enacted Bodies," Mol and her cowriter John Law propose a tripartite model for conceptualizing the body:

> Asking the question "What is a body?" is worthwhile in quite a different way. … We all *have* and *are* a body. But there is a way out of this dichotomous twosome. As part of our daily practices, *we also do (our) bodies.* In practice we enact them. If the body we *have* is the one known by pathologists after our death, while the body we *are* is the one we know ourselves by being self-aware, then what about the body we *do*? What can be found out and said about it? Is it possible to inquire into the body we *do*? (45)

If, for Mol and Law, there is a body that we have, a body that we are, and a body that we do, I suggest in addition that there is a body that we *sound*, a body that we *listen with and to*, and a body that we *make* and *make with.* Indeed, sensing the vibration of a song's sound waves, for example, is necessarily corporeal, and we make sense of the (aural) sense within and between sounding and listening bodies.

In the context of song lyrics, theories of listening are relevant not only when thinking about the listener of the song, but also when thinking about the song's central character or persona: the *lyric I*. The "lyric I" is a literary figure that describes the first-person speaker of a lyric poem. Lyric poetry is a capacious and storied form; originating in Ancient Greece, the lyric

poem was once distinguished from drama and epic poetry by its relative short length, single focus on the affective experience of the speaker, and, often, performance accompanied by a lyre. Lyric poetry has been historically characterized as purely confessional and non-narrative.[10] Though there has been a turn in the last fifteen years, prompted especially by Brian McHale's 2009 article in *Narratology*, "Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry," to (re)considering the role of narrative in lyric poetry, other scholars maintain that lyric poetry is a fundamentally non-narrative form. Jonathan Culler goes so far as to suggest that narratological reading frameworks have been awkwardly grafted upon studies of the lyric by readers more comfortable with prose narratives, who "adopted the model of the dramatic monologue as the way to align poetry with the novel" ("Why" 201). In lyric poetry, broadly speaking, the reader is granted access to an individual's confession, but not to their interlocuter's response; though the speaker or persona might imagine an interlocuter (many lyric poems are addressed to "you"), their delivery is unidirectional and self-contained.

Though they share a namesake, song lyrics are distinct from lyric poetry in several ways. First, song lyrics are sung aloud and accompanied by music, meaning that their primary delivery mechanism is oral/aural rather than written/read. Second, the term "song lyrics" are more akin as a taxonomic classification to the general "poetry" rather than the more specific "lyric poetry." This is a key distinction because, while some song lyrics are very much like lyric poetry in scope and structure, others diverge significantly. For example, song lyrics, unlike lyric poetry, have the capacity for complex narration, sometimes performed by multiple voices in conversation.

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[10] See especially Aristotle, Adorno, and, more recently, Jackson; Jackson and Prins; Langer; Lattig; Culler; Blasing.

This project began with my interest in songs with lyrics about listening to other songs, and how lyric personae sound and record their own meta-musical listening. Though theories of the lyric continue to proliferate, less attention has been paid to lyric listening.[11] When it comes to studies of voiced or sounded lyrics, I have often been stymied by the lack of a granular prosodic vernacular to describe the ways in which lyric personae metaphorically perform listening to and within their own songs. I term this figure the "listening I." As opposed to the lyric I, a concept that allows us to consider how the lyric persona[12] expresses itself, the listening I articulates how the lyric persona *listens*, to their auditor(s), audience, song's music, and, centrally, to themselves.

The persona of the listening I can be assembled as much by silence as sound, with empty space giving shape to its sonic materiality. Many songs are constructed as dramatic monologues

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[11] Some critics are troubling the concept of a unidirectional flow of meaning from speaker to listener. See, for example, Lisbeth Lipari's concept of "interlistening," which she defines as "movements of dense interactional synchrony wherein listening, speaking, and thinking co-occur with rhythmically textured and cacaphonously confused temporality" (504). Zoë Skoulding considers "listening through and with poetry, and … how poetry listens … [and responds] to an acoustic field that has been expanded by developments in recording technology and approaches to sound." Contemporary poets, Skoulding continues, are "reflect[ing] and creat[ing] new forms of lyric subjectivity as well as new relationships between bodies and environments" (1).

[12] In poetry or song lyrics, a persona is "[a]n assumed character or role, *esp.* one adopted by an author in his or her writing, or by a performer" (*OED*). While the Latin root of "persona," which translates roughly to "mask," is more common knowledge, Colin Heber-Percy notes its additional oral/aural etymology: "It literally means 'sounding through,' 'that though which sound or speech passes'" (354).

in which the listening I interpolates a silent other either by name or, more commonly, as only "you"; silence therefore can also embody the other side of conversations to which the listener is not given access. In this way, the silent listening other is an implied presence in songs with lyrics, and the listening I is the figure that listens to, and makes meaning from, their interlocuter's real or imagined statements. The listening I is also the figure that listens to *itself*, and I argue that, by paying close attention to the listening I's performance of their metaphorical inner ear, we might hear some possible ways of listening to *ourselves.*

For me, "listening to ourselves" means the embodied act of listening to the ways in which we audibly represent ourselves in the present, as well as listening both critically and compassionately to how we voiced ourselves in the past. It means tuning an attentive, interpretive ear to ourselves, acknowledging that we continually make meaning from echoes of the past, and committing to challenging the ways we have interpreted those echoes. Indeed, attending to the listening I — the self that listens — invites us to listen closely to the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, the ones inextricably tied up with trauma. This can be hard to do, not only because it is difficult to get enough metaphorical distance in order to hear yourself, but also because listening to yourself is often disorienting and sometimes mortifying. Achieving enough "distance" from your own voice to be able to attentively listen to it is a learned skill, a kind of purposeful, benign depersonalization.

"Listening to yourself" might be construed as egotistical or myopic, but I contend that listening attentively and critically to the ways we *sound ourselves* (in the past and in the present) is not only a core building block for empathy, but also a reparative, therapeutic tool for living with the noise and echoes of trauma. When thinking critically about the process of remembering, we often use visual metaphors: "shifting our perspective," "changing the ways we look at

things," "seeing things in hindsight," and so forth. Yet this dissertation suggests that it's time we attend to the personal and collective, and critical and political, value of listening attentively to the ways we, and others, sound our stories.

Over the course of writing this dissertation, I have come to understand my own writerly position as that of an increasingly emergent listening I. These pages record the ways in which my situated, subjective, embodied listening I listens to music, and what it sounds like as I learn to listen to myself. As discussed in Chapter Four, in my own journey with eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR), I have learned how to listen and tend to the silenced selves of my past by giving them my mediated attention. This kind of listening back, which is also a carefully tended reconstitution of the self, has allowed me to revisit and process triggering memories without experiencing them anew. The process of learning to listen to myself with care, which I have found to be the middle ground between dissociation and somatic flashback, has enabled me to *make it* through the process of healing from complex trauma, as has, I believe, the process of making this very record of my listening.

Listening in to someone else's listening practice is an intimate process; for this reason, I understand song lyrics that grant the attentive listener some measure of access into how the song's speaker listens to be some of the most powerful, for they attempt to give sonic form to feeling and make affect audible. In Chapter Four, where I think about listening in terms of searching and finding, I call the process of simultaneous voicing and listening "echolocation,"[13]

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[13] Inspired by bio sonar, which animals like bats and dolphins use in order to navigate and hunt. Animals emit calls and listen to their echoes in order to locate themselves within and against their environments.

a resonant spatial concept that imagines the lyric speaker to be always already listening even as they are sounding. In this metaphor, sounding refers to both to the active *making sound* and the evaluative *sounding out*, or *sounding the depths*. If making sound is configured as a listening tool, and listening as proprioceptive, then both are equal parts of biological and technological sonar. In the case of songs, I argue that the listening I not only constructs and situates itself by singing, but also by listening to the ways in which its voice resonates and echoes back. The process of simultaneous listening and sounding is also how I locate myself and my own relationship to this music — put differently, how I sound out how these songs sound to me.

Making It

In 2020, the first full year of the COVID-19 pandemic, an unlikely song experienced a sudden surge in popularity:[14] "This Year," track five from the Mountain Goats' 2005 cult-favourite album, *The Sunset Tree* (the subject of Chapter Three). The chorus of the song repeats a line that many people found relevant during that year: "I am gonna make it / through this year / if it kills me." As a long-time fan of the Mountain Goats, I found it to be a slightly uncanny experience to witness millions of new listeners discover this song fifteen years after its release — to hear what they *made* of it.[15] Making is the third conceptual thread of this project, emerging primarily from my work on John Darnielle and his band the Mountain Goats, and especially the

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[14] The song was, for example, chosen by popular vote for the top spot on *The Guardian Australia*'s *Good Riddance 2020* playlist.

[15] As Rebecca Jennings observes, "the Mountain Goats getting TikTok famous sort of feels like if *Ulysses* suddenly became the bestselling book on Amazon."

song "This Year." I hear the speaker's repeated claim that they are going to "make it" through the year as both a commitment to survival and to artistic creation — or more precisely, artistic creation *as* survival. In thinking about what it means to make it through and beyond the trauma Darnielle's persona describes on *The Sunset Tree*, I return to the etymological root of poetry, *poïesis* (Gk. *poiein*, ποιεῖν), which translates roughly as "to make." There is a linguistic link between making art and *making it* in terms of survival,[16] and I argue in this dissertation that there is a similar link between survival and the meaning-making process of attentive listening.

To make is also the verb most commonly used to describe making music, specifically making a record. When I started this project, I intended to think and write about the records that other people had made. I initially designed this project's interdisciplinary methodology to combine literary analysis with ethnography, especially following Meaghan Morris's "voxpop" technique of "interviewing, collecting background, analysing statements made spontaneously by, or solicited from, informants" (16).[17] Over time, however, I began to develop an additional sense of what I was making. This dissertation has emerged as a record of my listening in both senses of the word: what I make of these songs, and what they have made, and continue to make, of me. This dissertation's methodology is therefore a combination of literary analysis, particularly close reading and listening, and autoethnography, with my own ear serving as this project's principal self-reflexive listening apparatus.

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[16] My initial thinking on this arises directly from my conversations with Dr. Kevin McNeilly, my supervisor on this project.

[17] Echoes of this methodology remain, especially in my personal interviews with Fellows in Chapter Two.

And yet, is it still politic for poetry and song to focus on the self? Can rigorous self-examination build empathy as a political tool during our increasingly fractured times? This project questions the place and ethics of the self-reflexive listening I in the Anthropocene just as it builds upon Henry Jenkins's concept of the "aca/fan" (1), a hybrid academic and fan, which provides a model for how a scholar might engage with a subject of which they are also a fan — for I am, indeed, a fan of the musicians I write about. Nowhere is this self-reflexivity more evident than in the final chapter, where I provide an autoethnographic account of listening to document how attentive listening enabled me to make it through my own trauma, and how careful attention can become a kind of caregiving or tending. Though the whole dissertation is personal due to its methodological focus on my own ear, in the final chapter I invite the reader to "lean in close[r]" (the Mountain Goats, "Dance Music," *The Sunset Tree*) to the ways I listen to not only hear about what I make of songs, but to also listen into the intimate, personal process of my meaning making. As this project concludes, I trace my increasing awareness of what these songs have made of my listening I — how, in the process of my own attentive listening, these songs have listened to and (re)made me.

Sounding the Field

One of the ways to locate weak hope, I argue, is to listen for it; to pay close, careful attention to the ways our bodies resonate with sound and create meaning from it. In this dissertation, I model and record the ways I listen for and make weak hope from song lyrics. Song lyrics are both a likely and unlikely — strong and weak — source of hope. Of course, many people don't listen to the lyrics in songs at all, preferring instead to pay attention to the music. For these listeners, the tone and timbre of the words in songs — the melopoeia of the lyrics'

language — are usually more important than their content. For others, however, song lyrics are key texts in their artistic vernacular and central signifiers of aesthetic orientation. I place myself in this latter category.

Studies of song lyrics have been historically underrepresented in literary scholarship; they have often been mischaracterized as a lesser — *weaker* in the pejorative sense — form of poetry, rather than a form unto themselves. The exceptions to this rule include canonical white, mostly male songwriters like Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and the Beatles, who continue to receive an outsize proportion of academic attention. There has also been a steady increase in excellent scholarship on hip-hop and rap, though many studies focus more on the genre's cultural and political intersections than its lyrics. Books about song lyrics include Lars Eckstein's *Reading Song Lyrics* (2010), Charlotte Pence's edited collection *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (2012), and Matt BaileyShea's *Lines and Lyrics: An Introduction to Poetry and Song* (2021), but none of them overlap significantly with this dissertation's subjects, theoretical contexts, or methodology. In *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, for example, the majority of essays cover well-trodden musicological ground, with pieces on Bruce Springsteen, R.E.M., Leonard Cohen, and two papers each on Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash. In BaileyShea's introduction to *Lines and Lyrics*, meanwhile, he positions the book "for people who are so enchanted by the combination of words and music that the *simple act of listening* is not enough … this is a book for people who enjoy interpretation" (4, emphasis added). In contrast, I find nothing "simple" about the act of listening, and I contend that attentive listening is, in fact, inextricably entangled with interpretation.

It is a slightly tedious quirk of this nascent field that each book or collection about song lyrics as a literary form seems to think itself the first to take lyrics "seriously"; a perceived lack

of critical interlocutors makes some of the authors expansive in their claims and generous in their generalizations. The blurb on the back of Eckstein's 2010 *Reading Song Lyrics*, for example, claims that the book "offers the first systematic introduction to lyrics as a vibrant genre of (performed) literature. It takes lyrics seriously as a complex form of verbal art that has been unjustly neglected." In 2012, Pence positions *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* as "the first collection of academic essays that treats songs as literature by bringing to song lyrics a level of artistic and critical appreciation that has been too often reserved for other art forms such as the novel, poetry, and drama" (xiii). In 2021, BaileyShea contends that, while there are "many superb introductions to poetry and several excellent scholarly introductions to song, [he] knows of nothing that effectively introduces both in a single text" (5). In "The Challenges of the Song Lyric," editor David West's introduction to a 2019 special issue of *Language and Literature*, West dubiously claims that "[s]ong lyrics have been largely ignored in literary studies, too, with Christopher Ricks' (2003) work on Bob Dylan (*Dylan's Visions of Sin*) being more or less the only exception" (3).

I do not claim this dissertation to be the first to take song lyrics seriously. In fact, it's not even my own first thesis that takes song lyrics seriously.[18] While I acknowledge the trend in song lyric criticism to express bafflement at the relative dearth of scholarly material and, in so doing, stake their singular claim on the field, it is not relevant to this project to participate in it. For me,

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[18] My B.A. and M.A. theses, both completed in English departments, were about song lyrics: B.A. Honours Thesis, UBC, 2012: "When I Write My Master's Thesis': Weakness, Textuality, and Voice in the Lyrics of John K. Samson"; M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 2014: "Measure me in metered lines": Unreliable Narration and the Hermeneutics of Narrative Identity in Contemporary 'Indie' Song Lyrics."

the question of whether song lyrics have inherent literary "*value*" (3), as West puts it,[19] is moot; the answer is, much like any other form or genre, that some do, some don't. The song lyrics I listen to in this dissertation richly reward critical and scholarly attention, and I am honoured to submit these artists to the emerging canon of scholarly song lyric criticism.

One last note on field and discipline: though this dissertation focuses on song and therefore has the potential to overlap with musicology, I am not a musicologist. Scholars of popular music who trace material and auditory histories of pop songs[20] tend to overlook the content of song lyrics in favour of their musicality. By contrast, I do not attempt to describe my own listening from a music theory standpoint, nor do I elucidate musical techniques, production, or instrumentation of these songs. I do occasionally use lay descriptions of musical score or affect, but only in cases when I am centring my own listening ear; that is, I might analyze how these songs sound to me, but not the tools and techniques behind their production and performance.

I am not a musicologist, but I am an amateur musician, and a key step of my methodology is learning to play and sing each song that I write about. "Covering" a song — making a version[21] of it that is my own — is a fundamentally interpretive process. I record each of these covers because, in listening back to the ways that I sound my own listening, I often hear

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[19] West argues that awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan in 2016 challenged, for many scholars, "the very category of *literature* and raise[d] the dauntingly difficult question of *value*" (3).

[20] See especially Sterne; Brackett; Frith; and Straw.

[21] The idea of "versions" of songs is discussed further in Chapter Four in reference to Swift's (*Taylor's Version*) re-recording project.

nuance that I wasn't consciously aware of. In other words, when I listen back to my own cover of a song, I sometimes hear more clearly how a song covers *me.*

Invisible Strings

In this dissertation, I "tune [my] ear" (Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*) to five North American musicians: John K. Samson, Christine Fellows, the Mountain Goats (John Darnielle), the National (Matt Berninger and Carin Besser), and Taylor Swift. These artists are contemporary and, for the most part, still practicing and performing; I am lucky enough to have seen each of them perform live multiple times over the years, and, in the case of Samson and Fellows, maintain an ongoing correspondence. These artists are connected thematically, with common interests including grief, trauma, subjectivity, religion, love and loss, and progressive politics,[22] and also stylistically, with a focus on the precise and particular, frequent use of literary reference and allusion, and thoughtful diction.

Each of these artists is first and foremost a writer, beyond their identities as a musician and performer; not only do they write their own songs, but, in nearly every case, they have ongoing writing practices and engagements with literary culture. Samson and Fellows have each published books of poetry, and they have been writers in residence and adjunct professors of creative writing at a growing list of institutions. Samson is also the managing editor and co-founder at Arbeiter Ring Press, a Marxist publishing house, and was the winning "champion" of

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[22] There is a range here, from Samson and Fellows who are progressive activists and organizers to Swift, whose politics are often limited to an aspirational white feminism.

CBC's Canada Reads[23] two years in a row. Darnielle, in addition to writing over twenty albums with the Mountain Goats, is also a prolific novelist. Darnielle's debut novel, *Wolf in White Van* (2014) was nominated for that year's National Book Award. Berninger and Besser, the lyricists behind the National, wrote the lyrics for a new adaptation of *Cyrano*, a musical based on Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and Besser is a former fiction editor at *The New Yorker*. Swift, meanwhile, received an honourary doctorate from New York University in 2022, and her writing has become the focus of several university-level courses at institutions around the world. Ancestry.com has also recently announced that Swift shares a common ancestor with one of the poets whose writing she most often references in her own work: Emily Dickinson.

From a purely biographical perspective, the artists in this dissertation are also connected to each other personally; some as collaborators, some as friends, and in two cases, as spouses. Samson and Fellows have been married since 2005, and they continue to collaborate frequently on each other's projects as well as their shared online craft store and independent record label Vivat Virtute. Samson and Fellows are also well acquainted with Darnielle. In a 2007 interview with *3:AM Magazine*, Darnielle was asked which writers have the biggest influence on his own lyrics, and he responded, "Christine Fellows and John K. Samson are both working along the same kinda be-very-emotional-but-retain-formal-constraints guidelines that I always have in the back of my head" (O'Brien). When asked about his favourite musicians in many interviews over

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[23] Canada Reads is an annual "Battle of the Books" presented by CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Company, since 2002. Participants, who are usually celebrities or literary personalities, each "champion" a book published that year by a Canadian author, and panelists vote until one book remains as the title "the whole country should read this year" ("About Canada Reads").

the years, Darnielle regularly cites Fellows — he once charmingly asserted that "Fellows is writing better songs than anybody else. Everybody else is actually quite pathetic next to her" (*Pitchfork*). In 2006, Fellows opened for every date of the Mountain Goats' First Fall tour. The National and Swift have been frequent collaborators since Swift first worked with Aaron Dessner, one of the National's members, on her 2020 album *folklore*. Matt Berninger and Carin Besser, the lyricists for the National, have been married for over twenty years.

Finally, these artists are linked together through me: I chose to assemble them here in part because they are my favourite musicians. Their lyric languages are influential on my thinking, and their diction, cadence, and metaphors have integrated themselves into my personal, political, and critical lexicons. As this dissertation evolved, however, I started to understand how my enmeshment with these artists was not so incidental. I acknowledge, for instance, that each of these artists shares the major intersections of my own identity; they are white, straight passing, cisgender, and a settler living in either Canada or the United States. In selecting these artists, I realize I did not aspire to broad nor representative coverage in terms of musical genre, geographical area, race, gender, or sexuality. While my autoethnographic approach to this dissertation has allowed me to create work that I believe in and am proud of, I also openly acknowledge its inherent and potential limitations.

As is true for many people, song lyrics are my most readily and abundantly memorized texts, and my memory for lyrics is such that I can recite or sing the words to hundreds, if not thousands, of songs. When it comes to these five artists, whose lyrics are the subject of my closest attention as an aca/fan, fragments of their language are constantly at the tip of my tongue. As I was writing this dissertation, therefore, I decided to formally integrate evidence of the thematic and contextual commonalities that I hear in these artists' work. I have called each of

these connections an *invisible string* after the title of Swift's song "invisible string" (*folklore*). In Swift's song, the speaker sings, "isn't it just so pretty to think / that all along there was some / invisible string tying you to me?" Whether threads of some kind of fate, genuine collaboration, or, most realistically, my own aural interventions, I find great joy and aesthetic comfort ("isn't it just so pretty?") in the cross-pollinating influence I hear between these artists, and therefore between these chapters. By not only bringing these songs together, but also playfully engaging with the convergences of their themes — tracing and *making* connections between them — I am also demonstrating one of the pleasures of fandom. Much like "Swifties" enjoy searching for the "Easter Eggs"[24] that Swift scatters in her musical and paramusical releases, sewing *invisible strings* through this project is a formal enactment of one of the silly, joyful, *weakly hopeful* rewards of attentive listening.

The Lineup

In the following pages, I summarize each chapter, and provide some biographical information for each artist. I include relatively little biographical information about these artists or their careers within the chapters. Though Swift likely needs little introduction to most readers, other artists may not be as familiar. Knowing not only who these artists are, but who they are to me — the personal and parasocial relationships that I have developed with them over the years,

[24] Swift's longstanding practice of including "Easter eggs" in her musical and paramusical releases foregrounds the reciprocal relationship that she has built with her listeners. For a brief history of Swift's Easter egging, see Merinuk.

and my experiences attending their live performances — gives you, “Dear Reader” (Swift, *Midnights*) additional context for encountering this project’s subjects and methodologies.

Chapter One: “Tuned every ear towards a tiny lengthening of light”:[25] *Listening for Weak Hope in John K. Samson’s Winter Wheat*

Samson (born 1973) is a musician, writer, activist, organizer, and cultural worker from Winnipeg, Manitoba, who describes himself as a “talk-singing sober leftist vegetarian Quaker” (“About”). Samson was formerly the lead singer and lyricist for the Weakerthans, which released four critically acclaimed albums between 1997 and 2007. Samson has released two solo albums, *Provincial* (2012) and *Winter Wheat* (2016), and one book of poetry, *Lyrics and Poems: 1997–2012* (2012). Samson is known for his painstakingly precise lyricism, his reedy, nasal singing voice, and his deep engagement in progressive political activism. For example, he began his musical career as the bassist for vegan-anarchist-punk band Propagandhi, and many of his most recent songs have been written for progressive organizations. “Royal Bank of Canada,” for example, responds to the call of the Wet’suwet’en pipeline protests to pressure RBC to “divest from fossil fuels” (“Royal Bank of Canada,” *June First*). These days, Samson works with the Walls to Bridges society at Stony Mountain Prison, teaching literacy and creative writing to people who are incarcerated. I first met Samson in 2012 and have seen him perform live countless times since 2008. A hallmark of Samson’s later live performances is that he plays at least one song (often “Virtute the Cat Explains Her Departure,” *Reunion Tour*) completely unplugged, stepping down from the stage to join the audience in an acoustic singalong.

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[25] Samson, “Winter Wheat,” *Winter Wheat.*

Chapter One listens to the ways in which Samson's 2016 album *Winter Wheat* gently urges the listener to "tune" their "ear" to search for, identify, and gather hope — or what Samson calls "a tiny lengthening of light" ("Winter Wheat"). In this chapter, I articulate my concept of weak hope first as a framework for listening to Samson's lyrics and politics of the weaker-than, and then as the groundwork for a broader listening apparatus. I also argue that listening attentively to Samson's lyrics offers a reciprocal weak hope to the listener, a starting note with which to "tune [your] ear" towards the quiet, resilient strains of hope that thrum through collective action. I listen primarily to *Winter Wheat* in this chapter in part because its title track offers a concise metaphor for weak hope and in part because I have written extensively elsewhere[26] about Samson's prior lyrics and poetry. I have sequenced this chapter first both because it introduces weak hope, and also because my work on Samson is, in many ways, the origin point of this dissertation. As noted in the preface, my chapter on Samson also appears, in a slightly truncated version, in *Canadian Literature*'s fall 2020 issue.

Interlude: Vivat Virtute: Listening Across John Samson Fellows and Christine Fellows in Collaboration

Since 2016, Samson has released several singles and EPs, both under his own name and as part of Vivat Virtute. Vivat Virtute is the moniker of the band, record label, and craft store that Samson formed with Fellows. This brief interlude, positioned between but written after chapters on Samson and Fellows, listens to the ways these two artists listen to one another in

[26] See Malloy, "Tuned every ear." As noted in footnote twelve, both my honours and master's theses were, in whole or in part, about Samson's writing.

collaboration. I also think through the many the resonances of *holding* on Vivat Virtute's 2023 album *Hold Music*, from physical embrace to collective endurance (holding out; holding on).

Chapter Two: "We hold our hands up to the light":[27] *(Re)Sounding the Residual with Christine Fellows*

Fellows (born 1968) is a Quaker musician, poet, activist, and collage artist from Winnipeg, Manitoba. She has released eight albums under her own name since 2000 and one book of poetry, *Burning Daylight* (2016). Fellows is known for her intricate and often hilarious lyrics, quirky musical arrangements that sometimes lean into art song, and focus on stories about everyday women. She frequently works in collaboration with artists across multiple mediums and has contributed scores to devised dance and theatrical performances, museum installations, podcasts, films, and more. I first met Fellows in 2015, when I had the chance to interview her about her work. Some excerpts from that interview appear in this chapter. I have also been fortunate enough to attend many of Fellows's intimate, lively, and incredibly moving live performances since 2010.

In Chapter Two, I trace the ways sonic texture and literary reference form audible "residues of process" (Fellows, interview) in Fellows's work. These residues, I argue, formally echo Fellows's dedication to sounding stories that have been nearly lost to history. Fellows situates her songs in the Quaker tradition of "holding someone in the light" — as I describe in the chapter, to take what is abject and actively work to make it treasured. By including the sonic residues of her own life and home in her recordings and centering the voices and experiences of

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[27] Fellows, "Reversed Arrow," *Femmes de chez nous.*

unfamous, unglamorous, and, for most people, unremarkable women, Fellows holds the radically ordinary in the light, transfiguring plain, quotidian stories into the stuff of song. In both form and content, Fellows's songs perform a kind of re-sounding, or a curated echo, a layering of the archival with the imaginative. In this chapter, I listen most attentively to three of Fellows's songs about loss, remainders, and birds, in concert with critical thinking on grief, souvenirs, and ecopoetics.

Chapter Three: "I am gonna make it / through this year / if it kills me":[28] *Listening to John Darnielle's Listening on* The Sunset Tree

Darnielle (born 1967) is a musician, novelist, and activist who grew up in Southern California and settled in Durham, North Carolina. Darnielle is the founding member, and at times in the band's history, only member, of the Mountain Goats, with whom he has released over twenty albums and countless singles since the early 1990s. When the Mountain Goats released *The Sunset Tree* in 2005, it marked their transition from lo-fi home recording to studio recording, and it was also Darnielle's first explicit venture into autobiography. Darnielle is known for his distinctive cadence and delivery of his witty, evocative, and sometimes devastating lyrics. Darnielle identifies as a Catholic, and many of his songs and albums reflect his complicated relationship to the church, including *The Life of the World to Come* (2009), each track of which is inspired by and titled after a Bible verse. He has written multiple single-focus song cycles and concept albums, ranging from *Tallahassee* (2002), which follows the tumultuous relationship of a fictional couple named Alpha and Omega, to the Mountain Goats's latest album

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[28] the Mountain Goats, "This Year," *The Sunset Tree.*

Jenny from Thebes (2023), a rock opera sequel to *All Hail West Texas* (2002). I met Darnielle briefly in 2010 and have attended many of his live performances, at which audiences alternate between raucous singalongs and quiet, almost reverential attention.

Chapter Three focuses on the cross-pollinating, intimate links between listening to music and making music in the Mountain Goats' 2005 album *The Sunset Tree*. While the album reverberates with the abuse that lead singer and lyricist Darnielle suffered as a child at the hands of his stepfather, *The Sunset Tree* also begins to sound possible ways to *make it* through and beyond trauma. Darnielle positions *The Sunset Tree* as both a record of his own trauma and as a testament to the power of holding onto hope, even and especially in situations where you feel powerless. In this chapter, I listen to Darnielle's songs alongside theories of autobiography, trauma, and narratology, and I think more explicitly about the links between survival and attentive listening.

Chapter Four: Listening "for the hope of it all":[29] Finding Myself with the National and Taylor Swift

The National is a Grammy-winning alternative rock band comprised of five members, all originally from Ohio. Matt Berninger (born 1971) is the band's lead singer and primary lyricist, and he frequently collaborates on songs with his wife, Carin Besser (birth date unknown). The National has released ten studio albums since their self-titled debut in 2001, combining often comically self-effacing lyrics delivered in Berninger's loose, swaggering baritone with complex polyrhythms and melodies. Despite being known for their morose lyrical content (the band has

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[29] Swift, "august," *folklore*

affectionately been called music by and for “sad dads” [Petrusich]), the National’s live shows are anything but sombre; crowds frequently turn into leaping, screaming mosh pits. I have been to many National shows since 2013 and have absolutely shoved my way into the middle of the mayhem.

Swift (born 1989) is a singer, songwriter, and performer originally from West Reading, Pennsylvania, and now mainly based in New York. Swift has been a professional songwriter since she was fourteen years old and has won an untold number of the music industry’s most prestigious awards.[30] Swift’s music has evolved through several different genres, most notably country, pop, and alternative folk. Swift is known for her diaristic songwriting, which combines incredibly personal details with sharp turns of phrase that upend familiar aphorisms (for example, “I dress to kill my time” in “Death by a Thousand Cuts,” *Lover*). I have seen Swift perform live three times and have tickets to a fourth show later this year. Swift not only manages to make each of the tens of thousands of attendees feel that she is singing to them personally and directly,[31] but the sense of community and shared joy among the crowd, made up of mostly women, is unique in my experience. Though Swift’s collaboration with the National is something that I could not have anticipated in my “Wildest Dreams” (*1989 [Taylor’s Version]*),

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[30] I don’t mean this hyperbolically — an incomplete list on Wikipedia states that Swift has won five-hundred-and-thirty-one major awards and been nominated for many more. Swift also holds one-hundred-and-eighteen Guinness World Records, but, as she would say, “Honestly, baby, who’s counting?” (“So it Goes…”, *reputation*).

[31] See Petrusich, “Startling Intimacy,” for an account of this phenomenon among event attendees.

it was through listening to the music they made together that I returned to writing this dissertation following a leave of absence.

Chapter Four listens to the ways in which attentive listening enabled me to make it through and beyond my own trauma. This chapter was originally intended to focus solely on the National, but, following a series of life-changing events, came to include Swift, an artist in some ways very unlike the others in this dissertation. In this chapter, I shift my methodology to incorporate more explicit self-positioning, leaning into autoethnography to self-reflexively think through not only what I make of attentive listening, but what all this attentive listening has made of me. There is an interesting irony in this chapter; though my writing becomes significantly more personal and confessional, the musicians I engage with are those with whom I have had the least personal contact. Since this chapter listens to two artists, both separately and in collaboration, I imagine it like a metaphorical double album: the two parts are distinct, but sufficiently interrelated that they are best suited for simultaneous release. Coming at the end of this project, this chapter not only listens attentively to the National and Swift, but also makes literal and personal the ways in which attentive listening has allowed me to make it through trauma in order to make this dissertation.

Conclusion: "Something better. Something beautiful"[32]: Weak Futurity

In the conclusion, I start to think about future directions for this project, including applying this dissertation's concepts and frameworks to additional artists and expanding the

[32] Samson, "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World" (single).

theoretical scope. I end by listening to a recent song by Samson, "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World."

"It's the side effects that save us":[33] Concluding Introductions

In Jean Anouilh's 1944 adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone,* the Second Chorus expounds upon the nature of hope and tragedy: "Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn't any hope. You're trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is shout" (38). For many people, there is a sense in which living in the Anthropocene is inherently tragic; sometimes it does feel like most of the sky has already fallen, and the rest is on its way down. For some, a retreat into nihilism might indeed feel restful — it is easier, after all, to go gentle into that good night than it is to resist. Hope, however, "that foul, deceitful thing," isn't at all restful. Hope, especially the scraps of weak hope available to those of us who are all too aware[34] of the many ways the world is terrible, must be actively, intentionally, attentively *made.* Weak hope must be tended to and tuned towards, nurtured and gathered, sounded and listened for. In writing this dissertation, I am making a record of my ongoing attempt to tune myself towards weak hope — how I attend to these lyrics and, in return, hear them tending to me. As Samson sings, with apologies to T.S. Eliot, "I have heard them singing each to each, and who's to say that they won't sing to me?" ("Alpha Adept," *Winter Wheat*).

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[33] the National, "Graceless," *Trouble Will Find Me*.

[34] *invisible string:* "I remember it all too well" (Swift, "All Too Well [10 Minute Version] [Taylor's Version] [From The Vault]," *Red [Taylor's Version]*).

“Begin the Begin”:[35] Encore

In any good concert the music has the last word, and so I gladly cede the stage to some lyrics that sound my argument more clearly than I ever could. In the National’s song “Not in Kansas” (*The First Two Pages of Frankenstein*), the speaker describes some of the anxieties accumbent to living at the end of times: “Ohio’s in a downward spiral / I can’t go back there anymore / since alt-right opium went viral … I’m scared that I won’t / have the balls to punch a Nazi.” At the end of the song, however, the speaker describes the way that they “make it” through the terror, loneliness, and dissolution of despair. In other words, at the end of the song, the speaker listens for weak hope in music:

> I’m listening to R.E.M. again,
> “Begin The Begin,” over and over,
> “Begin The Begin,” over and over.
> It was then I was enlightened:
> Roberta Flack the whole way home.
> I was entirely unfrightened,
> Dozing off and eternally unalone.

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[35] The title of the first track on R.E.M.’s album *Life’s Rich Pageant.* “Begin the Begin” is a pun on Cole Porter’s 1935 song “Begin the Beguine.”

Chapter One

"Tuned every ear towards a tiny lengthening of light":[36] Listening for Weak Hope in John K. Samson's *Winter Wheat*

Weak things have power.

…only the truly weak are free of

the temptation to dominate, harm.

That is why democracy is about weakness,

why it is to the weak we turn for help

when we are beaten, condemned.

This is why poems continue

like the air.

(Tom Wayman, "Weak Things")

On his most recent solo album, *Winter Wheat* (2016), Winnipeg singer-songwriter John K. Samson lingers in the liminal space between despair and hope, locating a fragile fecundity in the dormant growing season evoked by the album's title. *Winter Wheat* voices a series of missed connections, unfinished stories, and interrupted conversations that cycle through many registers of despair before partially resolving into the tenuous hope that, as Samson writes in the title track, "this world is good enough, because it has to be."[37] Rather than advocating for complacency, Samson's songs perform a painful recounting of the past in order to imagine the

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[36] Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat.*

[37] This line references Samson's friend and fellow Winnipeg writer Miriam Toews' novel *A Complicated Kindness*.

troubled present as a time of tentative potential: though the world is not and has not been "good enough" as it is, still, to quote the title track, we must "salute the ways we tried" and "[find] a way to rise."

I posit "weak hope," which I characterize as a combination of resignation, optimism, and generative delusion, as a productive framework through which to listen to Samson's dense, richly allusive song lyrics. In turn, I suggest that listening closely to Samson's lyrics offers up a kind of weak, tenuous hope for the listener. In our increasingly fractured political times, learning to listen attentively, empathetically, and equitably is an urgent imperative. Though we may not know exactly "what survival means" (the Weakerthans, "Confessions of a Futon Revolutionist," *Fallow*), to use the words of artist Jenny Holzer that Samson quotes in *Winter Wheat*'s album liner epigraph, listening to, for, and with weak hope in *Winter Wheat* might model some collaborative "way[s] to survive."

Indeed, many narrators on *Winter Wheat* struggle with a central *agon* that feels contemporary: when action is likely futile, should we act anyway? In the face of late-stage capitalism, climate change, relentless technological advancements, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing genocide, and the global rise of far-right neo-fascist nationalisms, how do we locate hope? Do we dare feel hopeful? Is it too late to be hopeful? Samson's songs urge those of us who face these existential questions to "recommit [ourselves] to the healing of the world" and "pursue a practice that will strengthen [our] heart[s]" ("Postdoc Blues"). For the attentive listener, the very act of engaging with Samson's politics and poetics of weakness can form part of a practice that "strengthen[s our] heart[s]" by listening closely and imaginatively to the radical, unflinching empathy modeled in his precise, demanding song lyrics. Learning to listen for scraps of weak hope might just allow our splintered selves — "proud and strange and so hopelessly hopeful"

(the Weakerthans, "Exiles Among You," *Left and Leaving*) — to begin to "tune" ("Winter Wheat") to one another.

Both weakness and hope are recurrent tropes in Samson's writing; the weakness of hope and the hopeful potential inherent in (mis)perceived weakness are equally audible in his lyrics. Over the course of the four albums he released with his former band the Weakerthans between 1997 and 2007, Samson theorized the latent political power of people, animals, and objects considered not only weak, but comparatively *weaker-than* others. According to Samson, the band's name emerged from "a few places" (Todd). The first is a line from the 1992 film *The Lover* based on Marguerite Duras's 1984 novel of the same name: when a character is challenged to a bar fight, he responds, "'Go ahead, I'm weaker than you can imagine'" (qtd. in Todd). The second, as quoted in the Weakerthans' song "Pamphleteer" (*Left and Leaving*), is a nod to what Samson calls Ralph Chaplin's "old union hymn," "Solidarity Forever": "'What force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?'" (qtd. in Todd).

In both quotations, the speaker invites the auditor to begin to internally articulate not only weakness, but the weaker-than: if the character in *The Lover* is "weaker than [we] can imagine," how do we imagine weakness? Is weakness merely the absence of strength? The name "the Weakerthans" evokes similar questions: who decides who is *weaker-than* in the first place, and by what metric? Indeed, what are the politics inscribed in the ways in which weakness is constituted? Who benefits from upholding conventional hierarchies that range from strong, to weak, to the *weaker-than*? And what might happen if everyone deemed *weaker-than* were to band together? Rather than staging a counter-cultural celebration of true weakness, therefore, Samson's writing critiques commonly held conceptions of strength — including masculinity,

capitalism, individualism, anthropocentrism, and nationalism — and advocates for radical, collective, weak hope.

My articulation of weak hope is influenced by contemporary theories of complex, even contradictory, affects and literary and musical evocations of troubled feelings. Miriam Toews' titular *A Complicated Kindness* and Montréal-based band Stars' invocation to "take the weakest thing in you / and then beat the bastards with it" ("Hold On When You Get Love and Let Go When You Give It"), for example, sound as loudly in my thinking as critical voices including Lauren Berlant's and Sianne Ngai's. Weak hope is particularly conversant with Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* and Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*. In *Cruel Optimism*, for example, Berlant asks why, when confronted with political or personal "situations" (5) that are clearly detrimental, we adapt rather than revolt. For Berlant in this regard, optimism is both inherently destructive, in that it contributes to the preservation of a status quo that functions as an "obstacle to flourishing" (1), and necessary to survival. Optimism, she argues, "makes life bearable [even] as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (14). In *Ugly Feelings,* Ngai probes the tension between staying hopeful enough about life to want to survive, but not so blithely optimistic that we ignore the political imperative to make a better world. Ngai also critiques Adorno's description of the perceived "powerlessness and superfluity" of art (and, of course, Adorno was even more scornful of popular music), suggesting that literature's own awareness of its weakness is "precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness" (2).

My understanding of weak hope is also informed by the language of Samson's own writing. In an interview with *Geist* magazine, Samson suggests:

> There is a lot of potential in places that are removed from the centre of power… I have this feeling that that's where a lot of interesting things are going to emerge — things that

have the potential not to be sullied or defeated as soon as they're created. They can be ignored for a while. They can hover in between. (Tough par. 34)

Attentively listening for weak hope in Samson's songs allow the lyrics to provide "new words for old desires" (the Weakerthans, "Left and Leaving"). In this chapter, I re-listen to Samson's body of song in concert with *Winter Wheat,* tracing the tropes of tactility, technology, ecology, survival, nostalgia, loss, and faith to demonstrate how weak hope seeks a middle ground between optimism and ambivalence; I listen to how the weaker-than literary genre of song lyrics might tentatively rehabilitate people, places, and things hitherto considered powerless.

"A lonely line of buildings you can block out with your thumb":[38] Touching the City

On Samson's first solo LP, *Provincial* (2012), he set out to give voice to the ghosts, living and dead, that haunt the roads of Manitoba. Constructed as a sonic roadmap, *Provincial* navigates both meanings of its title: the roads that branch through the province of Manitoba, and the parochial, nonmetropolitan undertones of the adjective. *Provincial* holds steady as a cohesive piece of work with its driving compass returning "home" in the final track, matching the illustrated aerial maps of roads through wheat fields depicted in its album art. *Winter Wheat,* however, is more disjointed and expansive — Samson regularly refers to the fifteen-song album as "a bit of a sprawler" (qtd. in Lebar). This expansiveness is reflected in the album's cover art, which consists of an abstract wash of blues extracted from the foreboding prairie clouds in Winnipeg artist (and Samson's uncle) David Owen Lucas' 2009 painting *Grand Valley.* Instead of finding a road leading home, the dislocated protagonist in the title track begs the auditor to

[38] Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat.*

"allow the hope that we will meet again out in the winter wheat. Find me in the winter wheat."[39] Whereas *Provincial* tracks the roads and highways of Manitoba, the characters on *Winter Wheat* have been metaphorically driven off their paths; while *Provincial*'s narrators drive to or away from their objectives, the narrators of *Winter Wheat* are unanimously lost.

Samson's lyrics return, again and again, to his hometown of Winnipeg, and there are three major motifs in Samson's lyrics about Winnipeg: buildings, roads, and wheat. The cover of the Weakerthans' debut album, *Fallow,* is comprised of layered images of two of these motifs: a sepia-toned piece of wheat superimposed over a faded map of Winnipeg. *Fallow*'s album cover is therefore especially anticipatory of the themes of both *Provincial* and *Winter Wheat*. In the nearly twenty years between *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat*, Samson has continued to explore the possibilities of unlikely growth, with the real and metaphorical crops on both *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat* tentatively promising future harvest, images I understand as indicative of weak hope. Yet there's a further connection between the two albums to be found in their respective titles: winter wheat is often planted as a cover crop, which prevents soil erosion while neighbouring fields lay fallow (Clark). Laying a field fallow and planting winter wheat are not only intended to preserve and protect what is already present in the field, but also to optimize the soil for future growth. Though fields that are fallowed or planted with winter wheat may appear to be less valuable — or weaker than other crops — they are integral to the long-term survival of the farmland.

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[39] Although other chapters in this dissertation denote the line breaks of lyrics with slashes, Samson's lyrics in his album liner notes are structured in prose paragraphs rather than enjambed lines, which I honour in this chapter.

In the title track of *Winter Wheat* (track three), the narrator takes a similarly long view of their city and the fields that surround it. Resetting a scene from the opening of Miriam Toews' novel *All My Puny Sorrows*, the song begins with the dislocated narrator staring back at Winnipeg over fields of winter wheat: "So make a visor with your hand and squint at where you're from, a lonely line of buildings you can block out with your thumb." From far away, uniquely vertical amongst vast fields of wheat, Winnipeg appears "lonely" and small, mirroring the speaker. Between the two living bodies, the speaker and the city, are acres of wheat that are touched only by the "wind throw[ing] patterns on [the] field[s]." With the suggestion of a small hand movement, Samson draws similarities between the thumb and the wind "throw[ing] patterns" and the "sun selecting targets for the shadows to attack": the speaker flattens the entire city by blocking the vertical lines of buildings with their thumb. In doing so, Samson endows the smaller, weaker body of the narrator with the ability to physically "block out" the much larger entity of their hometown, playing with the power dynamics of perspective.

The narrator's distant perspective on Winnipeg in "Winter Wheat" echoes the position of the speaker in "Highway 1 West," track eleven on *Provincial*, who envisions the city's "lonely line of buildings" as "some cheap EQ with the mids pushed up in the one long note of wheat." For the speaker in "Highway 1 West," who is stuck on a remote highway from where it is "too far to walk to anywhere," the skyline of Winnipeg resembles the audio frequency line of an equalizer (EQ) on a sound system with the "mids pushed up." The "mids" are the mid-range of the song, usually including the vocal tracks, so pushing up the mids increases the volume of the vocals. Mapped onto an otherwise flat prairie landscape, the city not only graphically resembles a line of audio frequency with its "mids pushed up," but also enacts the sounds evoked by this

image: a city is a gathering of many voices, a chorus made louder, though no less lonely, in their multitude.

Pushing up the "mids" on an EQ and "mak[ing] a visor with your hand" are both tactile images in which the speaker changes their perspective on the city by touching it, even at a remove. For Samson, the city and the body are always linked; in one of his most famous lines, for example, which is based on a line by Winnipeg poet Catherine Hunter, the narrator of "Left and Leaving" (the Weakerthans, *Left and Leaving*) sings: "My city's still breathing (but barely, it's true) through buildings gone missing like teeth." Connecting the human body and the body politic, Samson endows the city with anthropomorphized agency, wherein it looks, listens, and breathes back at its inhabitants ("but barely, it's true"). The city, for all its mass, is still a weak, "lonely" entity that feels the wounds its inhabitants inflict upon it. For Samson, the city is late and moribund, kept alive only by weak hope: if the city is alive, it, too, might learn to listen.

In the title tracks from both *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat*, hope is found on the margins of the city, in the wheat fields that surround it. In "Fallow" (track twelve), the speaker invites his companion to step an appropriately funereal distance of "six feet off the highway, our bare legs stung with wheat," to "dig a hole and bury all we could not defeat." Though burials are usually imbued with finality, re-reading "Fallow" in the context of "Winter Wheat" might allow us to recast this interment as, instead, a planting: the weak, late offshoots of the narrator's despair sprouting nearly twenty years later in "Winter Wheat." Though "Fallow" ends with a desire that seems destined to be frustrated — to "stay for one more year," repeated throughout the song, even though "the lease runs out next week" — the speaker in "Winter Wheat" is, somehow, still there, sleeping in a "parking lot, air-mattresses gone flat." Like several other songs on *Winter Wheat*, there is comfort, and even hope, to be found in the unlikely act of survival.

In the second verse of "Winter Wheat," the persona reveals their vision of the tenuous hope they find in the small stalks of wheat growing around them. Entreating the auditor to join them "out in the winter wheat," the narrator describes their surroundings: "This crop withstood the months of snow, the scavengers and blight, tuned every ear towards a tiny lengthening of light, and found a way to rise." Samson's use of the word "tune" and his pun on the "ear[s]" of wheat transposes the natural image of growing wheat stalks turning to follow the sun into an image of purposeful, musical movement. Tuning is a precise, deliberate motion, wherein one attempts to bring all the separate notes or strings of an instrument into close harmony with one another. Like the focus of Samson's songs, tuning is both aural and tactile, using the "ear" to hear the desired note, and hands and fingers to adjust the strings' relative tension. Tuning is also fundamentally relational: not only must each string be in tune with the next, but each instrument in a band or orchestra must tune to each other. In this line, Samson endows the wheat fields with agency, rendering them, like the city they surround, ripe for comparison to the humans that live between and amongst them. If winter wheat crops can "find a way to rise" in tune with each other, perhaps listeners can attune their ears more purposefully towards one another. Rather than speaking, which is often associated with strength and power, metaphorical harmony might be found instead through a "weaker" form of engagement: attentive, empathetic listening.

"That hashtag wants me dead":[40] Technologies of Self

While Samson's writing retains a cautious hope that humans may find ways to retune ourselves with nature, non-organic sounds of technology are frequently configured as atonal

[40] Samson, "Select All Delete," *Winter Wheat.*

barriers to the dream of harmony. In “Fallow” (the Weakerthans, *Fallow*), for example, “radiators hum out of tune”; in “Stop Error” (Samson, *Provincial*), the speaker is “trying to ignore the theme that keeps repeating from Call of Duty 4” while surrounded by the “wheezy breath of cooling fans and hard drives”; and in “The Prescience of Dawn” (the Weakerthans, *Reconstruction Site*), the narrator decides to “Tune the FM in to static, and pretend that it’s the sea.” Samson, who no longer participates in any social media, even going so far as to conduct press interviews via postcard, worries that technologies are “advancing so swiftly [that] they … have in some ways overtaken us” (qtd. in Lynch). Several tracks on *Winter Wheat* meditate on Samson’s anxieties about technologies: “Carrie Ends the Call” reimagines Neil Young’s “Motion Pictures (For Carrie)” in the context of a failing long-distance relationship conducted primarily over glitching video-sharing platforms, and “Postdoc Blues” attempts to console a distraught postdoctoral fellow whose “presentation went terrible, all wrong dongles.” Samson’s songs about technology critique some of the ways in which technologies meant to foster and preserve connection have instead created fraught new spaces of mediated contact.

“Select All Delete” is one of several songs on *Winter Wheat* that emerged from a commissioned project Samson completed for the fiftieth anniversary of the Winnipeg Contemporary Dancers, written in response to Neil Young’s[41] life and music. Samson focused on Young’s 1974 album *On the Beach,* because it had “always sort of puzzled and delighted [him]. Musically and lyrically [Samson felt] like it [was] extremely prescient” (Samson qtd. in Lynch). “Select All Delete” is in written in response to *On the Beach*’s opening track, “Walk On,” which centres on ideas of bitterness, nostalgia, and survival. Samson chose to “update the song to

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[41] Young spent much of his early life and career in Winnipeg.

modern technology" (Samson qtd. in Lynch) by changing the speaker's adversaries from angry music fans to online "trolls."

The narrator of "Select All Delete" is particularly gloomy about the ways technologies have overtaken his life; he is both desperate to rid himself of technology and very much in its thrall. In fact, he seems unaware of the irony embedded in his central directive: he both wants to take a raze-and-burn approach to the technologies he feels trapped by and use technology to defeat itself. While Young's song opens with the line, "I hear some people been talkin' me down," Samson's narrator woefully warbles, "that hashtag wants me dead." In Young's "Walk On," the narrator unhappily observes that since he "can't tell [his detractors] how to feel," the best option is to "Walk on, walk on." In "Select All Delete," Samson refigures the physical metaphor of "walk[ing] on," which implies a steady forward motion, to a minimally mobile keyboard shortcut that is focused on stoppage and erasure. Young and Samson's narrators' respective responses to hardship engage with the vocabularies of their moments; while Young's 1974 speaker wants to physically move away from his problems, Samson's 2016 narrator turns to technology. In both songs, there is a resigned melancholia attached to these movements — there is no triumphant "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'"[42] kind of exit. While Young's persona seems confident in his ability to move on, Samson's seems desperate to "delete" his connections to his hostile surroundings.

In "Walk On," the narrator fondly remembers "the good old days, / Stayed up all night gettin' crazed. / Then the money was not so good, / But we still did the best we could." Young's protagonist has found financial success but appears to have lost several sources of meaningful

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[42] Nancy Sinatra, *Boots*.

connection in the process. Though the narrator misses these relationships, he acknowledges that other peoples' feelings are beyond his control: "They do their thing, I'll do mine / … [their minds are] hard to change / I can't tell them how to feel." In Samson's song, however, the narrator is warier of nostalgia, singing, "I don't mean to miss the good old days. The good old days were mostly bad." In these lines, Samson criticizes the sanitizing aspects of nostalgia, which can falsely equate the already specious notion of "simpler times" with "better times." In an interview with *CBC Music*, Samson notes that Michael Harris's 2014 book *The End of Absence* was influential to his thinking at the time of writing "Select All Delete." Harris "posits that people who have grown up with and without the internet … [are the] last people who will know both worlds, so there are certain things that we should safeguard from the time before the internet" (qtd. in Lynch). The "certain things that we should safeguard" are identified by the narrator in "Select All Delete" as "how dark the night got then, how absences could make me glad."

Continually illuminated by the lonely blue light of his screen, the narrator "can't get to sleep" because the screens irradiating his interactions with the world have make everything "too complicated," "too illuminated, too loud and indiscrete." Instead of "absence mak[ing him] glad," constantly mediated connections are making the narrator hyperaware of the widening gulf between him and those that he loves. Directly echoing a line of Young's ("Some get stoned, some get strange"), Samson's narrator offers advice to the listener: "When it gets you stoned or gets you strange, select all delete." Samson rarely repeats lines in his songs, and even more rarely notates repeated lines in his album inserts. In "Select All Delete," however, the title is repeated three times in a row at the end of each B-section. This anaphora reinforces the narrator's titular directive, but it also undermines it — while the audience hears or reads the line

six times in a short song, the narrator's repetition implies that he has been repeatedly unsuccessful in expunging that which he seeks to delete. The narrator is thwarted by technology yet again, with even his final attempt to delete his metaphorical hard drive proving unsuccessful. Faced with an unrelenting barrage of algorithmic "content," Samson's narrator might keep on deleting interminably and never make even a dent in the seemingly unlimited space of the internet. Echoing Young's narrator, Samson's speaker's inability to delete his connections to the hostile world around him leaves him with no choice but to "walk on" — a fittingly bittersweet opening sentiment to an album like *Winter Wheat*, which locates fragile hope in the stubborn resilience of survival.

Anxieties about the encroachment of screen-based technologies on our everyday lives permeate *Winter Wheat.* Like the narrator in "Select All Delete," however, Samson is careful not to naively romanticize "the good old days." Instead, Samson critiques technology's false promise of seamless connection; the idea that mediated relationships can approximate or even improve unmediated relationships. "Carrie Ends the Call" (track 9) is a play on Samson's interpretation of Young's "Motion Pictures (For Carrie)," which is that Young's song is "a love song to someone who is far away" (qtd. in Lynch) from the perspective of a touring musician. In "Carrie Ends the Call," Samson switches the script, imagining the troubled love affair from the perspective of a contemporary Carrie who lives in Winnipeg, is in a long-distance relationship with a "Neil-like protagonist" (Samson qtd. in Lynch), and who narrates the dissolution of this relationship through the lens of a video call. Samson has frequently spoken about his own dislike of video-calling technologies, calling Skype "a nightmare … the worst thing that I can think of. I just hate it so much" (qtd. in Lynch). It is not the technology itself that Samson seems to despise, but rather the deception that he reads as inherent to the medium. When a person leaves, "the place

that they leave is changed" (qtd. in Lynch) — pretending otherwise because we have access to a mediated representation of them does a disservice to everyone.

In Young's song, the "Carrie" he sings about is likely based in part on his romantic partner at the time of writing, actor Carrie Snodgress. In the opening lines of Young's song, "Motion pictures on my TV screen / A home away from home living in between," Young's persona sees his lover on his television screen. Even though life on tour is liminal and unsettled, the sight of a digital representation of Carrie makes his hotel room feel like "a home away from home." Samson's narrator, a contemporary Carrie, is more accustomed to seeing her partner on screen and has grown tired of "living in between." The song opens with an indictment of the trials of video-calling technologies: "So long living in between a tiny screen and a slightly larger screen, the loneliest way to stay alone. Your face frozen up in lines from milder climates and wilder times — I can't watch it glitching anymore." In the opening line, Carrie situates herself in the metaphorical space between the two small windows on screen during a video call: a "tiny screen" with a mirrored image of herself, and "a slightly larger screen" with a pixelated, frozen, glitching representation of her lover.

The first and last lines of the song — "So long living in between" and "So so long living in between," respectively — are both a farewell and a complaint about the long distance and amount of time that Carrie and her lover have been apart. "So long," Carrie says at the beginning, listing the reasons that "it seems impossible now" that they can stay together; and "So so long," she says at the end, offering a summative as well as a final farewell. In the recording of the song, Samson seems to punctuate the final "So so long" with a comma after the first "So" — "So, so long living in between" — underscoring the pun. Though Carrie's *so long*s may seem slightly cavalier, the tone of the song is one of resigned sadness. "I know why you had to go … "

Carrie sings, "I knew you would do your best, in vacuum tubes where the feedbacks nest, to make me smile." While Carrie is happy for her lover's success, she is unwilling to continue living in a suspended state. Like the narrator of "Select All Delete," for whom "the morning seems impossible," Carrie is unable to see past the current darkness to imagine a brighter future: "It seems impossible now, from another December we will barely remember when the summer arrives." Like several of Samson's characters, there is the sense in this lyric that Carrie could continue if only she could imagine a brighter future as possible — or better yet, *plausible.*

"May it all seem plausible":[43] Prayers for Survival

In a pair of songs addressed to trees, "Oldest Oak at Brookside" (track five) and "Prayer for Ruby Elm" (track thirteen), Samson imagines how human technological "progress" might appear to ancient trees. While these songs evoke the somewhat-tired trope of a stationary object enduring massive changes around it, there is something nonetheless reassuring about the steady survival of the tree, despite adverse changes to its habitat, that I hear signifying hope for the continued survival of the environment, but also humanity. Samson's writing has often sought comfort in the tactile, as when the narrator in "Utilities" (the Weakerthans, *Reunion Tour*) for example, longs to be turned into an object: "I just wish I were a toothbrush or a solder gun. Make me something somebody can use." In his review for the *A.V. Club,* Randall Colburn writes that "*Winter Wheat* is about preservation and perseverance. … Samson's lyrics tend to linger on buildings, trees, and landmarks, things we can touch. Sometimes, we have to remember they're still there and that it's on us to ensure they'll continue to be there" (par 1). Samson's songs

[43] Samson, "Prayer for Ruby Elm," *Winter Wheat.*

addressed to trees parallel the central growing metaphor embedded in the album's title. As plants manage to take root and survive despite adverse growing conditions, so too must humanity: on *Winter Wheat,* as Timothy Monger writes, "hope is hibernating just below the soil" (par 1).

In "Oldest Oak at Brookside," which is sung to "the oldest oak tree in Winnipeg's Brookside Cemetery" (Samson qtd. in Lynch), the narrator traces backwards through history to the moment when the oak was "set in sandy soil." With more than 200,000 graves, Brookside Cemetery, opened in 1876, is the largest civic cemetery in Western Canada. The unnamed narrator speaks for settler Winnipeggers, alive and dead, using the pronoun "we" throughout the song in their address to the tree, whose growth has been fertilized by generations of their interred bodies.

Most lines in the song begin with the word "Before" and dig back through moments in Winnipeg's history both political and personal: for example, "Before we built that smirking airport, before the phones told us where to go." Both opening images in this song give a troubled anthropomorphized autonomy to the nonhuman elements that they describe, with the airport "smirking" and phones "tell[ing] us where to go." The narrator is likely describing the new semi-circular terminal that was added to the Winnipeg James Armstrong Richardson International Airport in 2011. Seen from the vantage point of an airplane, the terminal's curved shape is imagined by the speaker as an unfriendly smirk rather than a welcoming smile. The terminal is Canada's first to be LEED-certified for its environmentally friendly construction and operations, and the award-winning architect, César Pelli, "drew his inspiration from the vast prairies and sky" ("Winnipeg Airport"). Samson's narrator reads a smug hypocrisy in the airport's environmental friendliness: while the building might be efficient, and its design evocative of the prairie fields it occupies, the effects of air travel are among the most environmentally disastrous.

Much like Samson's previous critiques of the boastfulness of Winnipeg's welcome signs on the Trans-Canada Highway in the eponymous songs "One Great City!" (the Weakerthans, *Reconstruction Site*)[44] and "Heart of the Continent" (Samson, *Provincial*), "Oldest Oak at Brookside" functions as a multilayered indictment of a city that plasters a smile on its outward-facing elements, while glossing over the inequalities faced by its most vulnerable populations.

As "Oldest Oak at Brookside" progresses, the narrator wades deeper into Winnipeg's history, further stripping away the smirking mask erected by generations of the city's "Golden Business Boy[s]."[45] Writing against his frequent characterization as a poetic voice for all Winnipeg, in this song, Samson weakens the authority of his singular settler voice. Samson criticizes Winnipeg's historical and present oppressions of Indigenous peoples: "before the treaty, before we broke a promise to appear." Winnipeg is on Treaty 1 land, originally the lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. The second half of Samson's line, "before we broke a promise to appear," references the Manitoba criminal code, which gives police the discretion to release alleged offenders if they sign a "promise to appear" form ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Local and national governments have repeatedly made "a promise to appear" to address their numerous treaty violations but have yet to make meaningful reparations.

In the final lines of the song, the narrator reaches back "before the treaty" to a time predating colonial invasion. The narrator describes how the oak tree might have been planted,

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[44] See Malloy, "Listening to Canada."

[45] The Golden Boy statue in Winnipeg is an image of corporate greed and hypocrisy in "One Great City!" (the Weakerthans, *Reconstruction Site*).

not by human hands, but by a series of natural processes: "You were lifted by a blue jay, beating wings above a sea, with a wave of grazing bison and tall grass prairie. You were set in sandy soil, and stand, a mighty oak." In these lines, the narrator engages in a fantasy of the natural, and seems to troublingly render the tree part of *Terra Nullius*. The problematic naiveté of the narrator, however, which is buoyed by a musical arrangement that swells and resolves into major chords as they are describing an imagined past, is undercut by the lyrics that several voices sing in chorus. While the narrator waxes lyrical about the oak tree's genesis, their lyrics are interrupted by and layered with a choral refrain of partial phrases: "Before we built that"; "Before the fire"; "Before the treaty" and "Before we broke." Like the narrator, the chorus uses the pronoun "we," but unlike the narrator, the chorus is plural, audibly comprised of several singing voices. The chorus peels back the rings of the ancient tree, not shying away from the atrocities the tree bore witness to but searching for the seeds of an antecedent hope. While in "Winter Wheat" the narrator invites the listener to imagine the hope of a future harvest, in "Oldest Oak at Brookside," though the tree stands among thousands of graves, we still see evidence of continued survival.

Several songs later, in "Prayer for Ruby Elm," Samson borrows the repetitive structure of liturgical songs in order to offer a prayer for the implausible survival of an elm tree. Samson has frequently adopted and subverted the language and cadences of religious texts and music, ranging from the opening track of the Weakerthans' first album, "Illustrated Bible Stories for Children" (*Fallow*), to "Hymn of the Medical Oddity" on their final LP, *Reunion Tour*. "Prayer for Ruby Elm" is transcribed in Samson's album liner notes in enjambed lines rather than his customary prose paragraphs, which underscores the liturgical structure. Commissioned for Winnipeg filmmaker Erika MacPherson's 2013 film *May We Grow* and co-written with Fellows,

"Prayer for Ruby Elm" is both a prayer for a specific elm and a prayer for the continued survival of the environment, nature, and humanity.

Though the tree is facing a number of threats, first among them Dutch elm disease, "a very common problem in Winnipeg" (Samson qtd. in Lynch), the narrator has one central, humble request: "May it all seem plausible." Throughout the song, the narrator parallels the threats that the elm tree is facing with those that plague humanity. While some dangers, like "thunderstorm[s]" and "climate change," are ominously realistic, at other moments, the tree is endowed with supernatural powers: the tree can not only produce oxygen, but the narrator prays that the leaves might "photosynthesize everything we're sorry for / into one long breath of air." The closing lines of the song also echo the weak, sapling hope for survival found in "Oldest Oak at Brookside" and "Winter Wheat": "Wherever we land," the narrator sings, encompassing seeds, birds, and humans all in one, "May we grow."

"Listing what's left":[46] Remnants and Ledgers

Though much of *Winter Wheat* is focused on sowing seeds for the future, unlikely as it may be to come to fruition, nostalgia is also a constant presence. The nostalgia on this album is a troubled, late nostalgia, which juxtaposes a longing for "the good old days" with the firm, rooted knowledge that "the good old days were mostly bad," as the lyrics in the album's opening track suggest ("Select All Delete"). In keeping with the fundamentally relational aesthetic of the weaker-than, Samson's personae perform a nostalgia that both mourns the past and

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[46] the Weakerthans, "History to the Defeated," *Left and Leaving.* As noted in the album liner, the title "History to the Defeated" is referencing W.H. Auden's poem "Spain."

acknowledges that the present is not an inherently weaker era. "There is real danger in valourizing the past," Samson writes in an interview with *Noisey*. "There isn't anything to make great again (to unavoidably borrow from the bewildering moment we are living in) because it hasn't ever been that great and … there's something weirdly and abidingly hopeful there" (qtd. in Bayer). Samson borrows hope for the future from the past, not by idealizing days gone by, but by performing a painfully realistic recounting. For Samson, singing about the past fulfills twin desires: to mourn and elegize, and to celebrate and resituate nearly forgotten potential.

To make sense of their losses, many of Samson's nostalgic characters itemize their longing through the vehicle of lists of remnants or remains: personal effects from a lost time or love that string together complex narratives of absence. Samson's writing, which is highly paratactical, builds images of the speaker and absent auditor in reverse, blocking out the shape of loss like an X-ray or afterimage, an accumulation of objects arranging around negative space. In the final lines of "History to the Defeated" (the Weakerthans, *Left and Leaving*), for example, the speaker takes stock of the effects left behind by a "Mechanic-school dropout" in order to build a shorthand understanding of the character, "listing what's left: a signed Slayer t-shirt, a car up on blocks in his mother's back yard." In "Everything Must Go!" (*Left and Leaving*), the narrator holds a yard sale to "pay [their] heart's outstanding bills," and lists items for sale ranging from "a cracked-up compass" to "a sense of wonder, only slightly used." In "Left and Leaving," the narrator explicitly identifies the items he is listing as mnemonic fragments, singing, "Memory will rust and erode into lists of all that you gave me: a blanket, some matches, this pain in my chest, the best parts of Lonely, duct tape and soldered wires, new words for old desires, and every birthday card I threw away." These lists act as both a final account — a tallying up of the

remnants of a life or love that leaves material traces of itself behind — and an act of gathering, of taking stock not just of what was left behind, but of what is "left" to move forward with.

Though several songs on *Winter Wheat* centre on loss, elegizing individuals, the environment, and even a Public Access television station, each of their narrators finds a way to cling to hope. The narrator of "Fellow Traveller" (track ten), for example, who is a fictionalized representation of British art critic and Soviet spy Anthony Blunt, mourns his loss of control over his disgraced public image ("Rain for the last day that I will be known the way that I want them to know me"), and compares the loss to the defection of his erstwhile companion, the titular "Fellow Traveller." Though the narrator is now completely alone, abandoned by his government, co-conspirators, and even his dreams, and though memories of his partner are increasingly blurred (by "rain," "tears," and time), by the conclusion of the song, the speaker "still believe[s] in you and me." "Fellow Traveller" resituates a historically "weak" narrative — a queer love story between two disgraced Communist-sympathizing double agents — as a sympathetic, deeply human tale of staunchly enduring loyalty and companionship. Though "Fellow Traveller" is unique within *Winter Wheat* for its physical and historical settings, its story of lonely, unlikely, left-leaning solidarity in the face of ongoing loss places it in clear thematic concert with the rest of Samson's work.

Returning to Manitoba, the song "Requests" (track four), commissioned for Erika MacPherson's 2018 film *Heimþrá, In Thrall to Home,* is comprised of accumulative requests from a woman to her deceased female ancestors for transhistorical, reciprocal forgiveness. The speaker is thus gendered female in this song. There is a tragic latency to these requests, an unfulfilled yearning that circles back upon itself in the bookended lyric of the opening and closing lines: "I want you to know what I forgive you for, now that you're all ashes anyway."

Like many of the requests in the song, the speaker's opening entreaty switches suddenly between the registers of grand narratives of human existence (death, forgiveness, and family) and the quotidian, embodied realities of life and death ("now that you're all ashes anyway"). The mixed tonalities of this song resemble the reality of experiencing the death of a loved one; it is both an earth-shaking, cosmic shift in reality and the most ordinary event in the world. The speaker's final "anyway," offhandedly tagged on at the end of a line jam-packed with affect, undercuts the gravity of her request with its conversational tone. The speaker is both insistent upon being heard by the auditor and self-conscious about the whole interaction, beginning and ending with a trailed off "anyway" that suggests she may be resigned to many of her requests going unfulfilled. Though the speaker's requests, which range from wanting the auditor to "hear the farm apologize for letting you believe you could return" to wanting "every highway sign to remember we were here," are largely untenable, Samson situates hope for salvation, or at least something approaching forgiveness, in the very utterance of a request.

In its explicit voicing of frustrated entreaties, "Requests" resembles the opening line of "(manifest)," the first song in the sonnet cycle that structures the Weakerthans' 2003 album *Reconstruction Site:* "I want to call requests through heating vents, / and hear them answered with a whisper, 'No.'" Like the whispered denial in "(manifest)," the speaker of "Requests" voices her requests to an absent or invisible auditor with not only the fear but the intention of being denied. While the auditor can no longer hear or feel forgiveness, the speaker's performance of absolution locates forgiveness in the voicing of her song: though the intended auditor may either deny or not hear the request, we, the listeners, bear witness. Like the ashes the speaker scatters in the second line ("Every step into the river pushes you further away"), the speaker clutches at the remnants of the auditor even as she watches them disperse, singing, "I

want you to take your time to disappear." In "Requests," the speaker performs one of the most enduring forms of elegy: singing her mother's memory into lyric so that the listener might share in her remembrance. Delivered over a splashy, gently tick-tocking beat and sparsely plucked guitar, this song sounds memory, delaying the auditor's disappearance "in 4/4 time" (the Weakerthans, "Left and Leaving," *Left and Leaving*) and making a lasting *record* of their abbreviated relationship.

"I have heard them singing":[47] Dreams and Delusions

Several characters on *Winter Wheat* locate hope for survival through their dreams and delusions. In an interview with *Noisey* magazine, Samson says that one of the "themes that runs through [*Winter Wheat*] is delusional thinking, and how sometimes we need to learn to live with our delusions, accept them, in this case turn them into a useful reason to live … maybe our delusions can help us survive" (qtd. in Bayer). In two sets of paired songs spaced throughout the album, Samson explores the creative, generative possibilities inherent in delusional thinking. The song pairings give the two narrators extended story arcs, allowing them the space to "learn to live" with their delusions, which also gives the listener more time to invest in the characters. Though the first song in each pairing presents a character whose professed optimism seems misguided at best, Samson writes both characters a relatively hopeful sequel song. These sequel songs invite the listener to bear witness to the transformative power of hope, and to invest in the productive, creative possibilities of dreams and delusions — or, at the very least, to listen more closely and generously to the ostensible delusions of others.

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[47] Samson, "Alpha Adept," *Winter Wheat.*

In the spoken word track "Quiz Night at Looky Lou's" (track eleven), the mentally ill speaker struggles to find connection, travelling around to small towns and putting on quiz nights in exchange "for a reasonable fee and a place to sleep." The narrator is hoping to meet someone else that can "sing with [their] mind," who will "reveal themselves" once they have heard the "elaborately coded message, a quiz within a quiz, answerable only by Alpha Adepts and mind singers." Each night, the narrator says, he is disappointed, and every year that passes "is beginning to dull [his] powers, which were once considerable." "Quiz Night" is the third spoken word track that Samson has released, and the only one on this album. Samson's choice to speak rather than sing the lyrics in this song echoes the narrator's *agon*: though he "sings" constantly with his mind, only his spoken quizzes are heard. The only lines that are sung in this song, comprising the repeated refrain, "Quiz Night at Looky Lou's, I trust you will know what to do," sound the remaining moments that the narrator is hopeful, looking forward to what he believes will be the first moment that someone truly hears his song. "Quiz Night" does not sound like a happy song — it seems likely that the narrator's dearest hope, which has repeatedly been thwarted, is doomed to repeated failure. Though the narrator professes to feel optimistic at the end of the song, having prophetically dreamed of meeting a companion later that evening "at Looky Lou's Sports Tavern in Sioux Lookout," the listener is left feeling skeptical.

In "Alpha Adept" (track twelve), however, which immediately follows "Quiz Night," the narrator is granted some weak hope, or what Samson has called "a happy(ish) ending" (qtd. in Lynch). Contrary to the expectations set up in "Quiz Night," in "Alpha Adept" the narrator has indeed met and connected with a similar-minded companion. "Alpha Adept," which is a sweet, lighthearted song, is rendered all the more effective by how unexpectedly it concludes the slightly desolate narrative "Quiz Night" sets up. Backed by a relaxed, upbeat track, the narrator

sings lines that are disarmingly charming in their hopefulness, delusional as they continue be: "All I can say is I'm excited. All I can do is let you know you are the one I wanna be with when they return to claim the Earth." The narrator's vision of an alien force "return[ing]" to "claim the earth," which would be an apocalyptic vision for most people, is a source of great excitement for the narrator, who believes that the earth will be cosmically swapped out for a "planet near Orion's belt where everyone is happier and tall." Until "they" return, the narrator sings to his companion, he has set up a "fort out in the forest near a stream" to live in. "I'll sing my prescriptions … " the narrator confidently tells us, "and they'll place them in a tiny yellow sailboat and sail them to me."

The narrator's delusions have allowed him to first make an unconventional but stable life for himself within the confines of society by conducting quiz nights, and then to find companionship and a home that is only tenuously tethered to society. Finally, the narrator's delusions offer him hope for the future: "I have heard them singing each to each," he sings, and, rejecting Prufrock's hopelessness, "who's to say that they won't sing to me?" The final lines of "Alpha Adept" echo the closing lines of "Prayer for Ruby Elm," "may it all seem plausible"; through his delusions, the narrator of "Alpha Adept" has constructed an alternate path for himself, where everything is not only possible, but *plausible*. There remains abiding, if fragile and contingent, hope for the narrator, who has built himself a plausible way to survive from fragments of dreams and delusions.

"Let it rest and be done":[48] Weak Listening

Long-time listeners of the Weakerthans will recognize another pair of songs on *Winter Wheat* as a kind of meta-elegy, completing a much-loved tetralogy of tracks about a cat named Virtute. The first two songs in the series, "Plea From a Cat Named Virtute" ("Plea," from *Reconstruction Site*) and "Virtute the Cat Explains Her Departure" ("Departure," from *Reunion Tour*), offer a cat's perspective on her owner's spiralling mental illness and addiction. "Virtute," a Latin word that Samson translates roughly as "strength," emerges from one of Winnipeg's first city mottos, "Unum Cum Virtute Multorum," or, "One with the Strength of Many." In "Plea," Virtute tries to convince her owner that he is stronger than he thinks: "Listen, about those bitter songs you sing? They're not helping anything. They won't make you strong." Virtute insists that her owner find connection with other humans to gain "the strength of many." Like many of Samson's songs that dramatize failures of communication, however, Virtute's auditor is unable to understand her pleas or access her language of assurance.

In "Departure," Virtute and her owner have lost all ability to communicate. Having strayed too far from home, Virtute first loses her memory of the way home, and, eventually, her memory of her own name: "For a while I heard you missing steps in the street, and your anger, pleading in an uncertain key, singing the sound that you found for me … but I can't remember the sound that you found for me." In "Plea," Virtute begs her owner to "Listen"; in "Departure," though she can hear her owner "for a while," Virtute slowly loses her ability to locate meaning in human sounds. The song dramatizes Virtute's dislocation through auditory imagery that weakly sounds "in an uncertain key": "half moon whispered, 'go'"; "for a while I heard you missing

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[48] Samson, "Virtute at Rest," *Winter Wheat.*

steps in the street…singing the sound that you found for me”; “I found this noisy home”; “when the voices die”; “desperate to hear you make the sound that you found for me”; and “shallow breathing made me purr.” “Departure” is less of an explanation and more of a lament for the final fracture in communication between Virtute and her owner. One of the more directly tragic moments in any of Samson’s lyrics, Virtute’s fate remained uncertain in the nearly ten years following “Plea,” until *Winter Wheat* resurrected her spectral figure. Going beyond the obvious interspecies communication incompatibility, the Virtute tetralogy can be read as an extended meditation on the importance of learning to listen, even or especially when the voice is *weaker* than your own.

The first evocation of Virtute on *Winter Wheat* is oblique, coming midway through “17th Street Treatment Centre” (track seven), in which the narrator cheerfully details the twenty-first day of his stay at an in-patient facility. It is unclear whether this is the narrator’s last day in treatment or simply a day that feels like a turning point, but “on the twenty-first day,” the narrator lists the ways in which he is reclaiming some fragile hope: “The sun didn’t hate me, the food wasn’t angry, the bed didn’t sigh, the ceiling said it’s possible I might get my looks back.” Though the speaker is feeling stronger, his outlook is still coded in the languages of addiction, displacing blame for the side effects of his withdrawal (light sensitivity, queasiness, restlessness, insomnia, and doubt) onto anthropomorphized objects around him.

From his tentatively hopeful mindset three weeks into the program, the narrator is able to reframe his “court-ordered stay,” finding positives and even humour where before he found none: “On the twenty-first day, I danced to the twelve-step, examined, admitted I’m powerless

to…"[49] Using the phraseology of the twelve-step program, the narrator sings his way to a tenuously hopeful, if incomplete admission: while he is powerless over any word placed at the end of his sentence, he locates a new resilience in its very vocalization. In the classic twelve-step program, admitting that you are powerless over your addictions is the first step to regaining power over one's own life. In step with Samson's politics and poetics of weakness, hope for the future in "17th Street Treatment Centre" can be found in the narrator's reclamation of his own powerlessness. The song concludes with a similarly "hopelessly hopeful" (the Weakerthans, "Exiles Among You," *Left and Leaving*) statement: "In for three weeks, or in for forever … Most of us probably not getting better, but not getting better together." Finding community in even the bleakest of locales, the song's narrator locates transformative hope in shaky, situational companionship.

Directly following the narrator's admission that he is "powerless," he describes how he passes time in the treatment centre: "Sang the one about the spring the cat ran away." In this moment, the keen listener will identify the narrator as, for the first time in Samson's cat-song catalogue, Virtute's owner. Though the cat has long since died, the echo of Virtute's songs seems to form the soundtrack of his recovery. Yet in "Virtute at Rest," the final track on *Winter Wheat*, we hear from a spectral version of Virtute. The song opens by situating Virtute's voice within her owner's mind: "Now that the treatment and anti-depressants and seven months sober have built me a bed in the back of your brain." Though this song again dramatizes Virtute speaking

[49] Though this line may sound like a sentence fragment, and several online sources transcribe the final word as "too," "to" is consistent with the album's liner notes.

entreatingly to her silent owner, for the first time there is an underlying assurance that her owner *can* hear her.

Singing from directly within her owner's mind, Virtute echoes some of the larger issues of the album — forgiveness, mental health, rehabilitation, and attenuated companionship — and invites (rather than pleads with) her owner to "Let it rest — all you can't change. Let it rest and be done." Though, Virtute warns, "it will never be easy or simple … [and] I will dig in my claws when you stray" — the "when" rather than "if" and owner-cat-inversion of "stray" weakening any sense that the song is absolving the subject of responsibility — there is weak hope in Virtute's gentle insistence that her owner transform his indulgent inaction into generative *rest*. In *Winter Wheat*'s gentle, cozy closing track, Samson allows this sprawling, anxious album to come to rest, turning inwards once again. As Virtute and her owner finally find one another in the realm of the imagination, resting together "like we used to, in a line of late-afternoon sun," their voices cohere into one, singing the sounds that they found for each other in a melancholy, late, and weak chorus of hope. As the listener lays the *Winter Wheat* to rest, we are invited to join the chorus by continuing to sing the sounds that we have found in its tracks, tuning ourselves carefully and attentively towards one another.

"A way to survive":[50] Beginnings

In the epigraph to *Winter Wheat*, Samson quotes visual artist Jenny Holzer's 1994 aluminum plaque, which reads, "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy." Holzer's piece resembles a heavy memorial plaque, but it is formed out of a weak metal alloy. I

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[50] From the epigraph.

understand Holzer's plaque as evoking a simultaneous hope for the future — "a dream" and "joy" — with the late, backward-facing grief of an epitaph. For Samson to use Holzer's tentatively hopeful epitaph as an epigraph to *Winter Wheat* suggests a similar tension between the memorialization of a troubled past and a theoretical, dream-like hope for the future. Like Ngai and Berlant, Samson wrestles with the complicated, occasionally *ugly* or *cruel* feelings that can attend hopefulness: is it possible, or even ethical, to cling to hope anymore? In uncoupling hope from sources of oppressive power, the *weak hope* I hear in Samson's lyrics imagines a collective chorus that tunes itself into metaphorical harmony primarily through radically equitable listening — becoming "one with the strength of many" not through forced cohesion or the erasure of difference, but by the loudest voices quieting themselves to listen to the weaker-than. *Winter Wheat* offers no blithe assurances, but instead begins to model the weak hope of attentive, empathetic listening, inviting listeners to tune our own ears towards the tiny lengthenings of light that just might be surrounding us already, out in the winter wheat.

(Interlude)

Vivat Virtute: Listening Across[51] John Samson Fellows and Christine Fellows in Collaboration

"Everybody's gotta hold on hope

It's the last thing that's holding me."

(Robert Pollard, "Hold On Hope")

In this interlude, written after the chapters it is bookended by, I listen to the liminal space between two artists whose practices have long listened to one another's. I finished writing Chapters One and Two in late 2019, and in the years since, Samson, who now goes by John Samson Fellows, and Christine Fellows have formed a band, independent record label, and online store selling their own handmade crafts. All these ventures share the same moniker: Vivat Virtute. As you will recall from Chapter One, *Virtute* is a Latin word that Samson translates roughly as "strength," and it emerges from one of Winnipeg's first city mottos, *Unum Cum Virtute Multorum*, or "One with the Strength of Many." *Virtute* has been a central figure in Samson's work as both a concept and as a character. Though the "Cat Named Virtute,"[52] who features in at least four of Samson's songs, is "at Rest"[53] in her last named appearance in Samson's discography, she is granted a kind of eternal life in "Vivat Virtute": Virtute Lives — Long Live Virtute.

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[51] Following Travis Mason's description of poet Don McKay's liminal poetics, discussed further in the following chapter on Fellows.

[52] the Weakerthans, "Plea from a Cat Named Virtute," *Reconstruction Site*.

[53] Samson, "Virtute at Rest," *Winter Wheat*.

Vivat Virtute formalizes Samson's and Fellows's long-time collaboration under one name and underscores the ways in which their common interests and mutual influence have shaped their individual practices. Strength and weakness (and cats, though not Virtute by name) have also been central tropes in Fellows's work as a musician, poet, visual artist, and cultural worker in her focus on underrepresented stories about ordinary women. The themes that have always tied Samson's and Fellows's work together — tactility, weakness and strength, environmentalism, leftist politics, Quakerism, and hope — are more tangible than ever in Vivat Virtute. Though Vivat Virtute is the first band that Samson and Fellows have formed together as a duo, they have been active collaborators and editors of each other's work for over twenty years; so much so that the experience of listening to Vivat Virtute is sometimes indistinguishable from listening to songs from either Samson's or Fellow's previous albums that feature both of their voices. By adopting a collective moniker, Samson and Fellows reject the inherently hierarchical credit structure of "Artist [featuring Artist]," shifting the spotlight away from themselves as individuals and onto the stories that they tell.

As the band Vivat Virtute, Samson and Fellows have released a mainly instrumental album, *Hold Music* (2023), and an EP predominantly featuring Samson's voice and lyrics, *June First* (2023). As a record label, Vivat Virtute has released Fellows's two most recent solo albums, *Roses on the Vine* (2018) and *Stuff We All Get* (2022), in addition to self-releasing *Hold Music* and *June First*. From their art to their business practices, everything Vivat Virtute touches emphasises the tactility and intimacy of the hand-made; for example, each order is accompanied

by a handwritten note addressed to the buyer by name.[54] Currently on sale via *VivateVirtute.com* are vinyl copies of Fellows's two most recent albums, framed collages and textile art made by Fellows, and one-of-a-kind scarves woven by Samson on a loom in their basement (Wasney), each named after novels or poetry collections.[55] When they first launched the store, each order came with "a Virtute cat toy made of scrap yarn, cotton string, and a tiny bell" (vivatvirtute.com). If you live in Winnipeg, they'll deliver your order for free.

Vivat Virtute is a self-reflexive cottage industry, and its emphasis on the handmade and personal clearly connect to Samson's and Fellows's politics of gentle and generous reclamation. In both form and content, Vivat Virtute protests the disposability of items, technologies, and people[56] inherent in the excesses of late-stage capitalism. With Vivat Virtute, in all its iterations, Samson and Fellows find hope and inspiration in taking "stuff" (from Fellows's album title *Stuff We All Get*) that is leftover, abject, or residual to the (re)construction site (indeed, the name of the Weakerthans' 2003 album), and transforming it into "something beautiful" (Samson, "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World," on the album of the same name). Vivat Virtute's work makes visible and audible the seams of its construction and proposes an emergent potential

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[54] When I bought a vinyl copy of *Stuff We All Get*, my note said: "Bronwyn! How lovely to see you're living in Montreal — hope all is well with you. All best from John & me. XO Christine."

[55] For example, a scarf that Samson recently sold was listed with the following description: "A vegan 66 x 6 inch scarf made with cottons by J on a rigid heddle loom in June, 2023. Inspired by 'Meditation on Abolition,' by Ashon Crawley. Lifetime repair guarantee (my lifetime. I'm 50)" (vivatvirtute.com).

[56] A sentiment in Vivat Virtute's "Do Not Worry" (*Hold Music*): "Everyone is fired, everything is cancelled. I know I deserve to be."

in thrifting, patchwork, and collage by "listing what's left" (the Weakerthans, "History to the Defeated," *Left and Leaving*) and gathering it into new life through the very act of *holding it together.*

"But I hold to hear it":[57] On Holding *Hold Music*

Vivat Virtute's first full-length album, *Hold Music* (2022), is comprised of seventeen instrumental tracks and one closing song with lyrics, "Do Not Worry." Written and recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Hold Music* sounds the anxieties, restlessness, and mundanities of holding on through a series of public-health-mandated lockdowns. The title *Hold Music* can be read in a number of ways, none of which preclude the others. First, as a descriptor: the short instrumental tracks are passably similar in form to the "muzak" often played while you're on hold with a corporation, waiting to speak to a representative. This reading is supported by the album's cover art, which features a collaged image of a young child with a consternated expression holding a telephone up to their ear in one hand and resting their chin in the other hand, as if weary of waiting on hold. Comparing or even classifying their own music as "muzak" would also be characteristic of Samson's and Fellows's practice of collecting what is otherwise weak or abject and holding that weak or abject thing in a new light. In this reading, *Hold Music* invites the listener to rethink their relationship with waiting, and try to open their ears to the potential for beauty in even the most stultifying experiences.

A second possibility is that *Hold Music* is a collection of the music that Samson and Fellows created while much of the world seemed to be "on hold" during the first years of the

[57] Vivat Virtute, "Do Not Worry," *Hold Music*

pandemic. The halt on touring and live performance significantly altered the professional lives of musicians. Many artists (including all the artists I discuss in this dissertation) turned to their musical practice as a way to process the collective trauma unfolding around them, to generate income from album purchases and streams, and, like so many others, to pass the time. For Samson and Fellows, the pandemic led them to experiment with new forms of making. For Samson, this included weaving, occasional songwriting (primarily in service of activist causes he is involved with),[58] and, later, forming a volunteer-led book club for people incarcerated in a

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[58] For example, "Millennium for All" (*Millennium for All*), titled after an organization of the same name, protests the exclusionary new airport security-like measures put in place in Winnipeg's Public Library's main branch, Millennium Library. The library's installation of metal detectors prevents people who might feel a need to arm themselves, such as those experiencing homelessness, from entering the library with their possessions. Millennium has also failed to install lockers, thus cutting off a number of vulnerable people from accessing the vital services the library offers.

On *June First*, Vivat Virtute's 2023 EP, two of the three songs are written for local activist groups. "Budget Delegations" writes back against the Winnipeg city council's regressive budget: "senior advisors with sharpened incisors distribute their spread sheets that say: roads and police and police and roads, roads and police and police and roads, roads and police and police and roads — that's where most of our money goes." In the song "Royal Bank of Canada," written in response to the call of the Wet'suwet'en pipeline protests, Samson sings, "Oh RBC, now everybody knows time's running out and each projection shows clips of our future, dying by degrees…each piece of pipeline multiplies thy sin, every account sounds your complicity. Divest from fossil fuels, oh RBC."

Winnipeg penitentiary.[59] For Fellows, *making* primarily took the form of painstaking stop-motion videography; she created a collage-based stop-motion video alongside each track of *Stuff We All Get*. In this reading, *Hold Music* is a product of deferral; what two musicians chose to make while their professional routines were otherwise on hold.

A third possible way to read the album title is as music meant to *hold* the listener.[60] One of the primary directives of COVID-19 lockdowns worldwide was social distancing, which was tantamount to a ban on embrace. Other than the people in your household, it was forbidden to physically hold your family and friends. In this way, *Hold Music* is also an offering: music to listen to while you wait to hold and be held, and, in the meantime, music to mimic the feeling of embrace. This reading also follows the Quaker[61] maxim of "holding in the light" what is weak or abject. Samson and Fellows are both Quaker;[62] in fact, Samson's entire biography on his website

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[59] Samson's ongoing work in penitentiaries, which is rooted firmly in his politics of decarceration and prison abolition, evidences his practical focus on recuperating the "weaker-than," those rendered abject by society.

[60] *Invisible String*: "Hold on to the memories, they will hold onto you" (Swift, "New Year's Day," *Lover*).

[61] Quakerism is also known as the Religious Society of Friends.

[62] I hear Samson and Fellows's Quakerism enacted in their lyrics and artistic practices in several ways. One Quaker value, for example, as stated in *Quaker Faith & Practice (5th Ed.)* is "careful listening": "Careful listening is fundamental to helping each other; it goes beyond finding out about needs and becomes part of meeting them. Some would say that it is the single most useful thing that we can do" (12.01, par 2). Quakers also linguistically equate listening with prayer: "Prayer, we learn gradually, has far more to do with listening than with talking… when we know someone is in trouble, we can and must

currently consists of the sentence, "John K. Samson is a talk-singing sober leftist vegetarian Quaker who lives in Winnipeg, Treaty One Territory, with Christine Fellows" ("About"). As discussed in the following chapter, when I interviewed Fellows several years ago, she and I talked at length about Quakerism and what it means to "hold someone in the light," which she described to me as physically or metaphorically holding one through difficult times: "[t]hat's why I write about women and old people, because you want to hold them. Especially marginalized people" (Fellows, interview). The songs on *Hold Music*, which include titles like "Tea Cozy" and "I Love You, Pickles" (an ode to their pet budgie), are peppered with the cozy, domestic sounds of Samson's and Fellows's home. Listening to *Hold Music* feels like being welcomed into the warmth of Samson's and Fellows's "old house" (Samson and Fellows recorded an album meant as a Christmas present for friends and family called *The Old House* in 2006). *Hold Music* is music that offers to hold the listener's company.

Hold Music closes with the song "Do Not Worry," the only track on the album with lyrics. Primarily voiced by Samson, the lyrics offer measured, weak reassurance to the listener. Though the world is harsh and bleak, and "we're all gonna die, that way or the other," there is hope to be heard, if, like the characters in "Winter Wheat," we tune ourselves to listen attentively to the natural world. In the first refrain, the speaker says, "Sometimes you hear it: the earth, air,

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listen (pray) for them (2.26, par 1). Another Quaker value is "plain speech" or "plain speaking": "It is not only that we hold a witness to the value of truth but also that straightforwardness saves us from many mistakes and much time wasted" (12.01, par 4).

the pear blossoms say, 'today's trouble is enough.'" In the second refrain, which closes out the song, the speaker sings, "But I hold to hear it: the crow, the tree, the flea beetle say, 'today's trouble is enough for today.'" In Samson's performance, the word "hold" sounds very much like "hope" — so much so that, were it not for the title of the album, I might remain unsure about which was the correct lyric. The slippery audition of "hold" and "hope" allow the concepts to merge and blend, where "to hold" — hold on, hold out, hold fast, hold one another — becomes one and the same as "to hope."

The sentiment that "today's trouble is enough" to reckon with echoes the speaker in "Winter Wheat," who asserts that the "world is good enough because it has to be" (Samson, *Winter Wheat*). In the face of the unprecedented global disruption and disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic and tasked primarily with the directive to wait — to stay *on hold* and *unheld* — the speaker of "Do Not Worry" redirects the listener's ear to the present moment. Each element of nature, from the "flea beetle" to "the light of two trillion galaxies" form a chorus urging us to hold onto hope; it's everywhere around us, if only we "hold to hear it." The speaker closes the song by promising the listener that, "Tomorrow you'll hear it." On *Hold Music*, Samson and Fellows urge the listener to hold out hope — however unlikely, however *weak* — that there is still hope to be heard, if only we tune ourselves to it.

Chapter Two

"We hold our hands up to the light":[63] (Re)Sounding the Residual with Christine Fellows

"We're clutching our hearts at the sound of the birds."

("Not Wanted on the Voyage,"[64] *Nevertheless*)

In this chapter, I listen to the ways in which sonic textures, literary reference, and archival materials form what singer-songwriter Christine Fellows called, when I interviewed her in 2015, "residues of process" in her lyrics and music. These residues, I argue, formally echo Fellows's dedication to telling stories of women and marginalized people and animals that have been nearly lost to history. In both form and content, Fellows's songs perform a kind of re-sounding, or a curated echo: a layering of the natural, archival, and imaginative. Fellows fashions meticulously researched and achingly empathetic glimpses into the vivid interior lives of figures as diverse as birdwatchers, small-town beauty queens, French Canadian nun voyageurs, and contemporary women learning to live with loneliness.

Fellows's official biography notes that she "finds music in sounds we tend to take for granted: the voices of the people we love, the sounds of the spaces we move through as part of our daily lives. … [H]er songs shed light on characters that tend to be overlooked and isolated, those whose struggles and triumphs are difficult to quantify" (christinefellows.com). Through her collaborations with artists working across multiple mediums and genres, deep investment in

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[63] Fellows, "Reversed Arrow," *Femmes de chez nous.*

[64] The *Nevertheless* album notes claim that this song "is based on the Phyllis Webb epigraph in Timothy Findley's novel, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, which is from her poem, 'Leaning.'"

eco-poetics, and emphasis on the tactile and material in response to an increasingly digitized world, Fellows pieces together small, unremarkable details into a series of stories that leave the listener slightly off-balance from their beginnings to almost uniformly abrupt endings. Confounding many of the formal and generic expectations layered upon songs and the lyric, including length, instrumentation, affective scope, characterization, and narrativity, Fellows *assembles* songs as much as she writes them. To listen attentively to Fellows is to participate in this assemblage — to gather, scrounge, compile, and collect sounds — and then to resist the urge to unscramble them. There is beauty to be made along the lines of overlay.

Fellows's collage-based artistic practice is made literal in the cover art for her most recent albums, music videos, and book of poetry, all of which combine photographs and illustrations and feature images of women layered with landscapes and animals (especially birds) in a trans-historic patchwork. In nearly all cases, Fellows creates these collages by hand. In Fellows's music, echoed voices, whispers, ambient sounds, recorded animal sounds, and tape hiss form sonic sediment, while in her lyrics, literary references, historical characters, and imagined lives extrapolated from archival photographs become linguistic layers. The seams at the edges of these layers, whether visual, lyric, or sonic, are palpably and deliberately frayed. In performing this layering, or re-sounding, I suggest that Fellows's songs invite the listener to take an active role in reassembling narrative and affect. Like the birdsong she prizes, most of Fellows's lyrics resist obvious interpretation; they invite, and maybe even require, multiple close listenings to begin to parse. Fellows does not ask the listener to unpick her meticulous layering, but rather to listen more attentively to the connections between unlikely groups or pairings as potential sites of emergent connection. Fellows does not work to erase difference, but instead, by visually and sonically reorienting her audience's relationship to clash, Fellows *découpages* an

assemblage of unlikely allies. Indeed, by reclaiming traditional mediums of “women’s work,” such as seamstressing, scrapbooking,[65] and stenography, Fellows gathers snippets of sounds and textures together until they form “one rough seamless cloth, bunched together at the knees” (Fellows, “Certainty,” *Femmes de chez nous*).

Fellows is in constant collaboration with photographers and collage artists, and many of Fellows’s songs return to print photographs for inspiration. Fellows’s 2011 bilingual album *Femmes de chez nous* (roughly translated as *Our Gals*), for example, was released with a DVD titled *Reliquary/Reliquaire* that features Fellows performing the album live accompanied by Shary Boyle’s live shadow art, which layers illustrations, shapes, and photographs on a slide projector. Indeed, the entirety of *Femmes de chez nous* is based in large part on archival photographs, specifically those that Fellows came across during her six-month residency at Le Musée de Saint-Boniface in Winnipeg. The song “Mlle. Sténo” is based on a photograph Fellows found of a woman in a parade wearing a crown and beauty queen–style sash emblazoned with “Mlle. Sténo.” This song performs many of Fellows’s sonic and historical layerings: it is based on an archival photograph; it imaginatively narrativizes the history of a small-town Prairie woman who was otherwise lost to public posterity; and it is bilingual, with interstitial whispered comments in French from the other girls in Mlle. Sténo’s typing pool: “All the girls in the pool,

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[65] While thinking about the feminization of collage and scrapbooking, Brinkman quotes from *The Scrapbook in American Life*: “in general, scrapbook and album making was considered a female activity, linked to traditional female concerns of holding families together and preserving nostalgic items” (10, qtd. 46).

they whispered, when the city clerk singled her out ('Ah, mais non!' — 'Oui, c'est vrai!')." The upbeat, choral female vocal, plucked cello, and staccato piano-driven music echoes the typing motif of the lyrics, with occasional bursts of percussion coming in like fireworks over the Jubilee celebration. Taking a slightly sunnier view of the profession than P.K. Page does in her poem "The Stenographers,"[66] there is nevertheless an urgency to the song that suggests that the parade is a welcome distraction from the drudgery of Mlle. Sténo's everyday life.

Fellows's heavy use of literary allusion, including epigraphs, quotations, and references, can be read as another site of re-sounding. Fellows sees "all art as a conversation" (Fellows, interview), and, by making clear, well-cited literary references, she facilitates a potential interchange between the listener and her original site of inspiration. "I always want to show the work," Fellows says, since it is also "a way to bookmark, like a little trail of breadcrumbs for the pigeons to follow." For Fellows, re-writing and, through singing, re-sounding words from written texts can also be a way of resituating narratives that could benefit from a new look through a feminist lens. On her 2014 album *Burning Daylight,* for example, which is accompanied by a poetry collection of the same name, Fellows retells Jack London's hyper-masculine stories about the Klondike Gold Rush from women settler perspectives. Started when Fellows was completing

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[66] Page's poem opens with an evocative description of stenographers gloomily returning to work following a single day's reprieve:

> After the brief bivouac of Sunday,
>
> their eyes, in the forced march of Monday to Saturday,
>
> hoist the white flag, flutter in the snow-storm of paper

an artist's residency in Dawson City, *Burning Daylight* disrupts London's authoritative narratives of solitary, white male modernist heroes living and dying by their wits in the wild and unconquered North. Instead, Fellows offers a more balanced approach, centering the experiences of women and more accurately characterizing the Gold Rush as a violently colonial endeavour.

In his article "Scrapping Modernism: Marianne Moore and the Making of the Modern Collage Poem," Bartholomew Brinkman situates Moore's early scrapbooking as the origin point for her practice of poetic collage (as opposed to the more conventional reading of poetic collage arising directly out of the visual avantgarde). Scrapbooking is a form of artistic assemblage that is particularly steeped in weak hope; a gathering of materials that might otherwise be abject ephemera, made precious only in their artistic arrangement. Fellows's 2007 album *Nevertheless* is inspired by the life and writing of Marianne Moore. Originally developed as a commissioned score for Susie Burpee's solo dance performance project *The Spinster's Almanac, Nevertheless* tells the stories of real and fictional elderly "spinsters" with dignity and humour.

The title track from the dance piece, "The Spinster's Almanac" (track four on *Nevertheless*), is narrated by an elderly woman who is singing to her long-lost companion about the small joys in her life, most of which are related to birds and how to connect to them: "One concession for the hens destined for slaughter: I read them poetry, they like the Yeats the best, and frankly, so do I. … [W]hat's good enough for chickens is plenty good enough for you and me." Again emphasizing tactility and connection, the first and last lines of the song are the same, though they are delivered at different tempos and with shifting affect, from blithe and up-tempo to sweetly nostalgic and longing: "You're never far away from me, I've had this lock of your hair now for half a century, or more, I keep it in a matchbox, in the pocket of my coat." In this

way, the narrator of "The Spinster's Almanac" is herself an almanac — a collector and preserver of the material remnants of connection — and a scrapbooker.

Fellows also compares Marianne Moore's practice of handmaking small chapbooks for her friends and acquaintances to her own recording process, saying that the sense of immediacy and humanity in small, handmade pieces of art is analogous to her sonic aspirations: "I'm always trying to [make my recordings] sound like [they're] not [recorded in] a clean, sterile environment without hiss. I love hiss!" (Fellows, interview). When recording her 2005 album *Paper Anniversary*, for example, Fellows chose to set up a makeshift studio in her own home so that she could feel free to "make weird noises" and have "accidents" without the surveillance or interference of producers (Fellows). "There has to be a certain accident to [recording]," Fellows says, "otherwise you're just putting tracing paper over it and trying to recreate something else." Throughout several songs on *Paper Anniversary,* the sounds of a cat purring and dogs' nails clicking on hardwood floors are distinctly audible. Some of her more recent recordings are interspersed with birdsong, which Fellows credits to Pickles, her pet budgie. Ambient sounds like tape hiss, running water, footsteps, birdsong, and the domestic noises of pets, sounds that other musicians might attempt to silence in their own recordings if they were accidentally captured, have become central to her artistic project. Indeed, they are a distinct marker of the curated echo and re-sounding within Fellows's work that I am theorizing throughout this chapter.

Fellows situates her songs in the Quaker tradition of "holding someone in the Light" (Fellows) — to work to make something abject treasured.[67] As distinct from the broader

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[67] "Hold yourself and others in the Light, knowing that all are cherished by God" (*Quaker Faith & Practice [5th Ed.]*, 1.02.3)

Christian practice of prayer, to hold someone in the light is embodied rather than intercessory; it does not rely on divine intervention, but rather commits the speaker to action. An offer to hold someone in the light is not a casual, even callous offering of "thoughts and prayers," but a promise to act with accountability. For the Quakers, *to hold* is not to grasp or clutch, but to embrace, or to extend another's reach; and *the Light* is synonymous with God's love, which is always already both within and surrounding each person. To hold someone in the light, therefore, can be as much about gently reorienting them back to themselves as it can be guiding them to a new path.[68]

By centering the voices and experiences of unfamous and unglamorous women, and by including the sonic residues of her own life and home in her recordings, Fellows holds the radically ordinary in the light, transfiguring plain, quotidian stories into the stuff of song. For Fellows, residue is not just a remainder but a potential site of recuperation. The fundamental tactility of the image of "holding someone in the light" —a gesture both of comfort and of scrutiny, of care and exposure — is one that many of her songs return to, and it is echoed in her lyrics' focus on hands and bodies. In a verse from her short song "Certainty" (*Femmes de chez nous*), for example, an unnamed "we" discusses their potential connections to the listener. While most of the melody is sung simultaneously by Fellows and Samson, a choral group repeats and occasionally presages the lyrics: "We trip and cringe and cry, we hold our hands up to the light, we speak in languages and gestures just like yours." Emphasizing both the difficulties and joy of connection, the song extends a commiserating hand to the listener with empathetic lyrics like,

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[68] *invisible string*: "Lord, if I make it through tonight / Then I will mend my ways, / And walk the straight path / To the end of my days" (the Mountain Goats, "You or Your Memory," *The Sunset Tree*).

"We lay awake at night, like you, full of terrible ideas." Though "Certainty" is in fact very much a song about uncertainty, it is also a comforting, empathetic ode to the collective experience of doubt, awkwardness, and — somehow, despite it all — hope.

On her most recent album *Stuff We All Get* (2022), Fellows sings about the simultaneous comfort and discomfort inherent in the "stuff" of life that "we all" collect, gather, and "get." *Stuff We All Get* is a deliberately capacious title, with both "stuff" and "get" carrying multiple connotations. On this album, "stuff" is inclusive of the material and the metaphysical, the bodily and the affective, whereas "get" suggests not only physical acquisition, but also knowing, understanding, and even contagion. The album's title also cheekily forms the acronym SWAG, a colloquial derivative of "swagger" that, in more recent years, has come to describe the copious promotional merchandise or party favours gifted to — and often immediately disposed of by — influencers who attend events. On this album, Fellows thinks through the ways in which *stuff* accumulates, its excesses producing organizational headaches in the micro and environmental devastation in the macro.

The title track, "SWAG" (track two), makes a distinction between the different types of "stuff" we accumulate throughout our lives. The song addresses a fractured, troubled world, where "stuff" includes the material, like the soda "Coke," a "jetpack," and the belongings we pack our suitcases with — "our luggage is strewn on the tarmac. Want my bags back! Want my bags back!" — as well as the digital or immaterial, including "passwords," "feedback," "screenshot[s]," and "your website." Our lives are full, the song suggests: "we're gathering up all the evidence left behind us. It's a hard drive. It's a hard drive. … we're ravelling but all our stitches are pulling at the seams." Yet in the final lines of the song, the speaker makes a series of requests for a different collection or collage of "stuff." Juxtaposing the list of stuff provided

throughout the song, this final list suggests that, rather than rejecting all forms of possession and the comfort that "stuff" can bring through troubled times, we may turn instead to a different kind of collection: "Give us patience. Give us grace. Give us peace. Give us space. Give us kindness. Give us light."

Through the many layers of Fellows's music, an enduring desire to make the un-extraordinary visible, tangible, and plainly *held in the light* shines through the earnestness of what one critic has called her "sans serif voice" (Everett-Green). Delivering alternately devastating and darkly humorous lyrics in her direct, unadorned voice, Fellows lets her lyrics, music, and collaborators' art do the sounding in a constant effort to re-focus the (spot)light elsewhere from her as a person and onto her characters' tales of caution and of joy. In her recorded music, live performances, poetry, and multimedia video work, Fellows not only holds the stories of others into the light, but also invites her audience in — to share its warmth, and its work. In this chapter, I take up some measure of this work; for me, listening attentively to Fellows's songs, and especially listening to them in concert with other critics' thinking, is to hold them in the light. In the following pages, I listen with particular care to three of Fellows's songs, "Vertebrae," "Souvenirs," and "bird as prophet." These songs sound some of Fellows's most provocative layerings; each song complicates both their speaker's and the listener's relationships to the accumulated sediments of love and loss via primary motifs of touch, residue, and estrangement. Assembling a record of my own listening to these songs — what I *make* of Fellows's assembled sounds and images — is to once again "tune [my] ear towards a tiny lengthening of light" (Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*), and an offer to hold you, the reader, in that light along with me.

“To better let the light seep through”:[69] Perforated Touch in “Vertebrae”

On *Paper Anniversary,* Fellows arranges dense layers of sonic and lyric texture to build miniature worlds in each song. Though these metaphorical worlds are precisely constructed, the album title suggests that they are also made of paper, itself a substance formed by collecting and melding layers of fiber and sediment, and which is thin and weak in the singular but surprisingly strong when layered together. A “paper anniversary” has, in Western tradition, come to refer to the traditional gift for spouses celebrating their first wedding anniversary. There are conflicting accounts of the history of this term, but the notion of exchanging paper-based gifts for the first anniversary dates back to at least the nineteenth century, with *The (Old) Farmer’s Almanac* suggesting “one month from marriage makes a sugar wedding; one year makes a paper wedding” (Thomas 39). One of the theories for the origin of the tradition suggests that the first year of marriage is akin to the first chapter of a longer story to come. *Paper Anniversary* opens with a short track called “Foreword,” which immediately introduces another paper-based metaphor: “So don’t give up on me quite yet / This paper trail’s misleading.” Beginning in medias res, the narrator entreats the auditor to stay with them through the twists and turns of their tale and suggests that even words and images in black and white on paper — a “paper trail,” which is sometimes used interchangeably with “evidence” — can be “misleading.”

The album’s second track, “Vertebrae,” opens with a line about a different kind of “paper trail,” in this case, a “photo essay … perforated ever so slightly to better let the light seep through.” This line is evocative of an old-fashioned slide projector, images clicking in and out of sight one at a time as they are lit from behind, projecting a series of images that together compile

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[69] “Vertebrae,” *Paper Anniversary*.

a narrative. Though Fellows describes *Paper Anniversary* as largely character driven (Usinger), she dedicates the collection of songs to "the memory of Wray Chapman," her late grandfather. In "Vertebrae," the narrator assembles fragmentary images of the process of a family's bereavement, focusing on the surreal, procedural moments that follow the death of a loved one in hospital. In this song, Fellows configures the art object as a site of imagined tactile connection, wherein the narrator holds a collection of photographs in the light. If *the light* is love — even God's love — then "Vertebrae" is a song about the deep pain of love's primary comorbidity: *loss*.

The full opening lyric, sung almost immediately following the first notes of music, introduces the setting: one of grief. The narrator describes "A photo essay of a family in mourning, perforated ever so slightly to better let the light seep through." A self-contained image that the song does not further explain, this line acts almost like a preface, suggesting that the photo essay is an ekphrastic metaphor for the song itself. The out-of-order images of loss that the lyrics describe can then be read as evocations of the series of photographic slides in the "photo essay"; the staccato and dampened piano notes forming sonic perforations that are as subtly invasive as they are illuminating. Reaching through the frame and claiming both agency and identification with this "family" by the use of the pronoun "we," the speaker narrates the static, in-between moments of frustrating inaction surrounding the illness and death of a loved one. In these lyrics, the family in mourning becomes a pastiche of itself, reduced to visual shades of their former selves — in other words, a photograph perforated by grief.

This opening line transforms the auditory experience of the song into something that the listener can, at least imaginatively, hold in their hands — or even tilt to "better let the light seep through" — blurring the line between the photo album and the musical album. This tactility

lends both a closeness and a distance to the narrative; while the incidents described feel vibrant and present, imagining the narrative as represented in a series of photographs reframes the events as far enough in the past as to have been memorialized in photographs and assembled in a "photo essay." Rather than a descriptive narrative of the final days of a loved one, "Vertebrae" is instead framed as an asynchronous sequence of doubly mediated story fragments. It is left to the listener to imagine the narrator's role in the printing, assembly, and dissemination of the photo-essay.

Though "light" is usually a positive, healing, or hopeful force in Fellows's work, in "Vertebrae," light can also puncture, burn, or blind. In the song's opening image, for example, while the perforations in the "photo essay" have been made "to better let the light seep through," there is a latent violence to the process: the photographic representations of the mourners had to first be punctured to make the images more legible. Twice in the song, the narrator describes returning home and "throw[ing] open the blinds in [the deceased's] empty room." There is a desperation to the adjective "throw" in this context that suggests opening the blinds feels like the wrenching back of a curtain or shroud,[70] a rude, tragic unveiling of absence. In this image, the light cruelly exposes loss, throwing the deceased's residual "fingerprints," from which the narrator tries to "avert [their] eyes," into sharper relief. In "Vertebrae," the residues of love haunt the speaker, even as they try to gather and hold them together like overflowing armfuls of "tiger lilies."

In a third oblique image of light in this song, the narrator describes the desperation they experienced during the final days of their loved one's life. "Last time I came here to visit him,"

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[70] *invisible string*: "Ducked behind the drapes when I saw the moon begin to rise" (the Mountain Goats, "You or Your Memory" (*The Sunset Tree*).

the narrator tells us, "I ran sunburned through the halls, my arms full of tiger lilies. I don't remember this." The speaker's sunburned skin, physical evidence of the warmth of the outdoors, embodies a lurid contrast to the pallor of their dying loved one's skin, washed out by the cold, harsh glare of hospital lights. There is a similar contrast in the narrator's choice of "tiger lilies": while white lilies are a common funereal flower, the narrator instead brings riotously colourful orange-and-yellow tiger lilies as a defiant offering. The narrator, skin vibrant with sunburn, disrupts the orderly, antiseptic hospital corridors by running through them with overflowing "arms full" of fiery flowers named after a ferocious wild animal. Despite their almost manic efforts to bring vivacity back to their loved one through osmosis, however, they lose him anyway. "I am not prepared," the narrator admits quietly.

Twice in the song, just before the narrator describes "throw[ing] open the blinds" back at home, flowers transform from emblems of hope to a florid wreckage of loss:[71] upon returning home, the first step in their new procedure of life post-loss is to "clear the doorstop of flowers." While once the narrator's arms were full of flowers, upon hearing of their loved one's death "in the hospital parking lot, on the way in," the flowers transform into barren, heavy branches: "fall to my knees … arms full of branches. I am deadfall. Deadfall." The repeated word "deadfall" is both a compound word that describes the bare facts of the situation — the narrator's loved one is dead, and the narrator has fallen to their knees in response to the news — and also the name of a

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[71] *invisible string*: "Now I know what dying means / I am not my rosy self / Left my roses on my shelf / Take the white ones; they're my favorites / It's the side effects that save us / Grace / Put the flowers you find in a vase / If you're dead in the mind it'll brighten the place / Don't let 'em die on the vine, it's a waste" (the National, "Graceless," *Trouble Will Find Me*).

hunting trap. A deadfall trap is made of large branches, which pin the prey under their weight when the simple mechanism is triggered. In this line, the narrator is trapped under the weight of their own grief, pinned down by the flowers that have suddenly transformed into heavy, barren branches. "I am deadfall," they plaintively sing, suggesting that they are both victim and trapper, predator and prey, crushed by the loss of the object of their love.

In the song's out-of-order narrative, the narrator describes their final visit to the hospital just after relating the moment that they learned of their loved one's death: "Came this far to say goodbye, to set things right. Instead, I fiddle with his blankets, fetching coffee no one will drink. I am not prepared." These lines speak to the horrible minutiae associated with an anticipated death; the bad coffee and small talk that punctuates the waiting that feels both grimly endless and preciously, graspingly brief. In the aftermath of a death, it is easy to regret silences, to wish there had been more time "to say goodbye, to set things right," but so often, instead of facing the enormity of impending loss, we cling to the small words and actions that feel like they might stave off the impossibly unknowable specter of death with their sheer banality. Even in its immediate aftermath, death remains alien: "Through the hush of debts and the roar of engines we'll struggle to recall: this is how it ended. This is how it ends." As sounds merge dissonantly together, memory reforms itself like a disordered "photo essay," already fading and blurring. "There's something I'm both remembering and forgetting," the narrator worries. "Is there something I'm forgetting?"

In the aftermath of their loss, the narrator and their family drive home in a dissociative state, imagining the experience of driving through "Sunday traffic" as "float[ing] inches above the road. Close our eyes and drive so slow, like we never need to get home." Waiting for them at home is the emptiness of their loved one's room, the rabble of condolence bouquets, and the

forensic residue of a life now gone: fingerprints, debts, and photographs. "Home. Turn the key in the door and pause for what seems like an awfully long time." Repeated at several points throughout the song, and closing the lyrics, is the line, "Why, when you know you should go, is it so hard to leave?" This line could apply to many situations and characters in the song: the narrator's dying family member, the hospital visitors, the physical remnants of loss like the flowers and debts, and the speaker's memories. In every case, holding on too tightly to the armfuls of affect or memory will cause them to collapse like deadfall. We know we should (let) go. We know this, and yet it is still too hard. "Vertebrae" sounds the residues of the grieving process.

The title of this song, "Vertebrae," is suggestive of both strength and fragility, linkage and rupture. Between the hard, calcified vertebra that form the spinal column are nerves and soft tissue that symbiotically support one another. The spinal column is frequently used as a metaphor among families; perhaps the dying subject of this song was colloquially understood to be the backbone of the family. Yet in this metaphor, especially within the context of the album's title, *Paper Anniversary*, I locate a weak, tentative hope for living through what may at first seem like unbearable grief: like a single piece of paper, a lone vertebra is fragile and easily broken; but like a sheaf of paper, vertebrae form a pillar of strength and support.

"Crosswords hidden in the landscape"[72]: Gathering "Souvenirs"

"Souvenirs," the sixth track on *Paper Anniversary*, is comprised of a series of gestural images encased in short end-stopped lines, more like a collage of images cobbled together from

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[72] "Souvenirs," *Paper Anniversary*.

pieces of a map and torn up napkins — abject, trash-bound souvenirs of travel — than a linear story. Like many of Fellows's songs, narrativity emerges in the act of assembling; the disordered layers of the lyrics resist cohesion, but together they form a rough patchwork of character and story. A formal tension emerges between the straightforward, concrete images that the song lists and the oblique ways they are delivered, each image isolated or stranded even as it abuts the next. The pulsating, urgent cello of the verses punctuates this staccato narrative, the story blinking in and out of focus like the hazard lights and cryptic crosswords that the lyrics describe. The first-person speaker addresses an absent auditor with increasing urgency, imagining them pulled over on the side of a busy highway. Though the song's narrative occurs in the realm of the imaginary, the speaker longs for tokens of the real in the form of souvenirs, material signifiers that the auditor was likewise thinking of the speaker while they were away. In "Souvenirs," layers of projection form affective sediment over a simple story of travel and absence, until the longed-for souvenirs become the only potential site for recuperating remainders of the real. This song theorizes souvenirs as a residue of travel, but more importantly of living; the way small items steeped in memory can make or break us, and the difficulty of letting them go; the *Stuff*, to prefigure Fellows's later album, *We All Get*.

Like the burning sun in "Vertebrae," the opening lyrics of "Souvenirs" describe a fractured, hazardous light. As opposed to the sacred or divine light of the Quaker religion, in "Souvenirs," light is immediately coded as tense and cautionary: "Hazard lights at rush hour." Turning on one's hazard lights during "rush hour" is a doubly fraught situation: some emergency has necessitated pulling over and engaging the hazard lights when the roads are at their busiest,

and tempers and tensions can run high.[73] The song's second line suggests that the speaker has pulled over not due to a vehicular stall, but rather an affective one: "Blinking back those years." Here, the hazard lights become a semaphore of distress;[74] the speaker has pulled over as they struggle to calm their emotions. The blinking hazard lights, which imply a binary on/off mechanism, play on the idea of needing to *blink back tears*, an attempt to suppress an onslaught of emotional memories the same way one might try to staunch an oncoming flood of tears. It is unclear whether the subject succeeds, but the situation implies both urgency and failure; the failure to see and therefore safely drive; the "failure" to gain mastery over painful memories, a defining element of trauma.

The next few lines of "Souvenirs" are even shorter and more fragmentary than the first two. By the third line, Fellows has effectively suggested a claustrophobic, flashing dislocation: "And wonder how you got here. This overpass. So close." Further blurring this song's sense of interiority and exteriority, the speaker is both projecting the subject's disorientation and expressing their own puzzlement about how the subject "got [t]here." The subject's confusion is reminiscent of dissociative amnesia, a condition characterized by an inability to recall information related to a traumatic event or series of events (DSM-V). Since the primary stakes of

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[73] *invisible string*: Winnipeg poet Catherine Hunter published a collection titled *Rush Hour* in 2000. The Weakerthans contributed an accompanying musical track to the auditory recording of the book. Hunter also inspired Samson's line "My city's still breathing, but barely, it's true" ("Left and Leaving") on the Weakerthans' album *Left and Leaving* from the same year.

[74] *invisible string:* "Make your face the flag of a semaphore" (the Weakerthans, "A New Name For Everything," *Reconstruction Site*).

the song regard the distance between the speaker and subject, the gulf between where "here" is located for each character becomes increasingly fraught. That the third, short line of the song opens with "And" lends the song a sense of immersion or immediacy, as if the speaker is already halfway down the highway. This beginning is also disorienting for the listener, however: it does not cohere grammatically with the previous lines, nor does it clarify what the subject's wondering is additional to. It is especially odd considering that the more grammatical substitution — say, for example, "Blinking back those years. Wondering how you got here" — would have scanned equally well. This slightly arrhythmic lyric throws the attentive listener subtly off balance, suddenly adrift in shifting, liminal narrative tenses and subject positions. In this line the listener wonders alongside the speaker "how [we] got here,"[75] in medias res of crisis.

As "Souvenirs" progresses, the speaker's and subject's selves begin to blur into one another, such that the speaker's questions and entreaties start to sound less externally focused and more like desperate self-directives: the second person becomes self-talk. For example, in the second verse, the speaker anxiously enquires, "If you can't bridge the distance then tell me who can." "Souvenirs" can thus be read as an urgent meditation on where and how to locate selfhood, especially during moments of significant duress. The song probes whether travel is a productive method of *finding* yourself[76] or intentionally *losing* yourself, or perhaps both. Either way, however, in this reading, the titular souvenirs become fragments of the self — memory,

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[75] *invisible string*: "If this is the long haul, how'd we get here so soon?" (Swift feat. the National, "coney island," *evermore*).

[76] *invisible string*: the National, "I Am Easy to Find" (*I Am Easy to Find*) and "Hard to Find" (*Trouble Will Find Me*).

relationships, potentially trauma — that automatically accumulate when you travel and, indeed, by virtue of being alive. As evidenced by the subject's attempts to blink "back those years" at the beginning of the song, the narrator is increasingly weighed down by surplus keepsakes of self that they are attempting to leave behind through the vehicle of travel, but instead continue to accumulate. Indeed, the speaker warns that "Souvenirs betray you."

We all carry within us souvenirs of trauma and experience, a process Samson described in the Weakerthans' song "Watermark" as the way in which "your body still remembers things you told it to forget" (*Left and Leaving*). Though the narrator of "Souvenirs" is certainly meditating on affective and embodied souvenirs, they are also thinking about more conventional souvenirs. Physical souvenirs are memorial and nostalgic devices for both the traveller and loved ones left behind that simultaneously "stop" or encapsulate a specific moment in time and memorialize absence or time spent apart. Souvenirs are an attempt to "bridge the distance" of absence as objects from another time and place meant to signify the desire for closeness and shared time. While a photograph might tell a thousand words, however, a souvenir often requires an accompanying narrative to make it mean something. More intentional than other material traces of travel, like coffee stains or dead insects on a windshield, souvenirs are selected with some measure of care. A souvenir, no matter how banal, is personal, and it can be as much about memorializing yourself as you were in a particular time and place as it is about remembering the location itself.

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart describes souvenirs as "traces of authentic experience" (135) that are "by definition always incomplete" (136). The narrative of the souvenir "seeks to reconcile the disparity between interiority and exteriority, subject and object, signifier and signified. We cannot be proud of someone else's souvenir unless the narrative is extended to

include our relationship with the object's owner" (136–37). In this song, absence weighs as heavily, or perhaps even more heavily, as presence; missing souvenirs "weigh upon" the speaker just as weightily as "those years." The subject's attempts to move, despite the heavy weight that they are carrying, are also stymied, leaving them feeling "stuck," hazard lights flashing: "Travel time follows the stuck clock on the dashboard. Stop the car." There is a sustained tension in "Souvenirs" between motion and stillness, momentum and entrapment. Like a car pulled off on the side of a busy highway, the clicking *tick-tock* of its hazard lights marking time even as its clock remains "stuck," both characters are caught between the stasis of backward-facing memory and the forward march of time.

The speaker asks the auditor to "bring back" unusual, potentially untenable souvenirs: first, two species of birds, "a cardinal from Kentucky and that blue-eyed dove that followed you from Texas." The speaker posits the request as a question: "*Could you* bring me back…" (emphasis added). The answer would, of course, be no, and so the speaker downgrades their request to "a coin rubbed smooth and run over by a passing truck." The speaker asks for a tactile, worn item that has been "rubbed smooth," presumably through human touch, and also forcibly imprinted by the very road that the auditor has been driving along by a "passing truck." While collectible coins are common souvenirs, the speaker does not want a pristine, mint-condition coin; they request one that has been used, carried, worried, and spent. The speaker longs for physical evidence of the ravages of time — hard metal worn away through contact and the pressure of travel. I suggest, then, that what the speaker is requesting is shared time, touch, and experience, both through the connotations of the coin and the nonsense questions that prolong their conversation and encounter.

Indeed, in the final line of the song, the speaker pivots abruptly from their request for a souvenir and instead asks for a brief and distant moment of connection: "Could you call me when you're overhead so I can run out to the front lawn and wave you on?" In this line, the auditor's mode of travel has switched from car to plane, and, rather than asking the subject to return (as implied by the repeated phrase "could you bring me back"), the speaker wants to "wave [the auditor] on." Instead of a request for closeness, stillness, and tactility, therefore, the speaker resolves to accept the reality that there is distance inherent in even the closest of relationships. In this way, the speaker gives the auditor their blessing to leave — rather than an entreaty for avian souvenirs, the speaker hopes that the auditor takes flight. While the speaker still desires connection, asking the auditor not only to call, but to call when they are directly overhead of the speaker's home, they promise to be content with the attenuated touch of a wave. In this way, the song conceptualizes the souvenir as a residue of the process of travel, yes, but more importantly of being alive. "Souvenirs" is as much about holding on — to people, to the memories that make (or harm) us, and, especially, to stuff — as it is about learning when to accept and let go.

"bird as prophet": Listening to Fellows's Birdwatching

As evidenced in the desire of the speaker in "Souvenirs" for "a cardinal from Kentucky or [a] blue-eyed dove," motifs of birds, flight, and birdwatching are rife throughout Fellows's catalogue. From the title of her first album, *2 Little Birds* (1999), to the album art that Fellows made by hand for her 2018 album *Roses on the Vine*, which features a bird's head *découpaged* onto a human body wearing a floral pantsuit, birds are a persistent preoccupation. At last count, over twenty of Fellows's songs directly mention birds; many more make oblique reference.

Fellows is an avid birder — in her words, "I stalk birds" (Carter) — and many of her narrators watch, search for, care for, collect, or mourn birds. Fellows suggests that "[p]oets are, as a rule, obsessive birders, so I know they are my people" (Carter), and indeed the close, careful attentiveness of listening and observation that are prerequisites for birding are also skills that lend themselves to the reading and writing of poetry; birding is like close reading or close listening to the natural world. This connection is evident on *Paper Anniversary*, for example, where Fellows sets Argentine poet Julio Cortazár's 1962 poem "Instructions on How to Dissect a Ground Owl"[77] to music, and on *Roses on the Vine*, where she uses two lines from "I Am!," a poem by John Clare, a poet renowned for his bird poems,[78] as an epigraph to "Dutch Blitz." The practice of birding, which seeks only to observe birds in the wild, can amount to an intangible collection, with field recordings, photographs, and the occasional feather forming its only material traces. For Fellows, songs are a way to record and memorialize not only the ephemeral glimpse of a rare bird, but also the lives of common species — her *bird in the hand* taking the form of song.

While birds sometimes serve as motifs of freedom, flight, or flightiness, in other cases, Fellows writes directly about birds, such as in "The Parlour Rollers" and "Poor Robin[79]" on *Nevertheless*, and "Pop-Bottle Chickadee" and "Little Crow" on *Stuff We All Get*. In "bird as prophet" (*The Last One* Standing), she includes direct field recordings of birdsong. These

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[77] This poem was translated to English from Spanish in 1969 by Paul Blackburn.

[78] See Chun and Falke.

[79] Fellows excerpts these lyrics from an adaptation of *Who Killed Cock Robin?* (Author Unknown).

recordings add an organic layer to her records, a sense of spontaneity and live capture. Across her bird-song catalogue, however, birds are primarily positioned as animal characters that trouble anthropocentricism. For Fellows, birds are nonhuman others that, more than domesticated companion animals, exist at the margins of human life. Though birds and birdsong are largely ubiquitous, we often take their physical and sonic presence for granted. Consistent with her project of taking what is forgotten, marginalized, or quotidian and giving it voice, in her songs about birds Fellows holds tiny feathered lives in the light to remind the listener that, at any given moment, there is life all around us, if only we listen for it.

In her bird songs, Fellows takes a slightly more hopeful approach to the Anthropocene, or what Bill McKibben calls *The End of Nature,* than do many other contemporary poets. In her 2018 book *Remainders*, Margaret Ronda traces contemporary American poets' preoccupation with "remainders of various kinds, from obsolescent commodities to polluted air and toxic matter" (5) as they write during and through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These poets, Ronda argues, are writing in a "decidedly minor key, one that is skeptical of progress and reform" (5). Fellows does not take a naïve approach to ecological crisis. Instead, she urges a different kind of *attention* to remnants and residues, locating meaning and hope in small, resilient remainders of the natural world. In this way, Fellows's lyric preoccupation with birds and birdwatching align with what I have identified in Samson's lyrics as *weak hope*. "Hope," is after all, "the thing with feathers."[80]

In his 2013 book *The Ornithologies of Desire*, Travis V. Mason traces bird and birdwatching imagery in poetry, primarily in Canadian poet Don McKay's work. Mason argues

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[80] Emily Dickinson, "'Hope' is the thing with feathers - 314"

that attentive ecocritical readings have the capacity "to read across genres and disciplines, to listen to many different stories, and to speak/write polyphonically" (xi). While other texts have centred on poets' enduring fascination with birds,[81] Mason's focus on McKay's listening modalities are particularly germane to my reading of Fellows's bird lyrics. For McKay, Mason contends, listening is liminal, occurring at thresholds of wilderness and human habitation, or what McKay calls "the frontiers of the audible" (McKay, "Little Rivers" 28). "The porch," writes McKay, "is the ear of the house" (*Deactivated* 19); both inside and outside, the ear is an emergent physiological threshold both at the edge of sound and the centre of listening.

Listening to birdsong, and then attempting to evoke the listening experience either onomatopoeically or experientially, is a particularly liminal experience, or, as Mason writes, an attempt to "listen across" (xi). Sounding somehow *between* natural "noise" and human-made music, representations of listening to birdsong are, for McKay, "mini-poems" (*Vis à Vis* 85) that, as sound-texts, encourage attentive listening practices (Mason 148). Like Fellows, McKay's poetry resists onomatopoeic attempts to recreate birdsong,[82] instead leaning into the resistance or recalcitrance of phonemic transcription. Birdsong cannot be rationalized into language; instead, birdsong reminds the listener that not all listening must be centered on comprehension, that it is possible — perhaps imperative — to lean into listening to non-human others whose music we

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[81] For example, Mason cites Leonard Lutwack's *Birds in Literature* (1994) and Thomas Gannon's *Skylark Meets Meadowlark* (2009).

[82] With the exception of "Pop Bottle Chickadee" (*Stuff We All Get*), which includes the line, "Cracking up seed, pop bottle chickadee-dee-dee-dee," which extends the bird's already onomatopoeic name.

will always fail to understand. Listening closely to birdsong invites both a recognition and decentering of human enmeshment in the natural world; it encourages a careful, attentive self-estrangement.

On Fellows's sophomore album, *The Last One Standing* (2002), the speaker narrates a slightly adversarial relationship between themselves and a character named only "bird" in the song "bird as prophet."[83] Titled after "Vogel als Prophet," a solo piano piece by nineteenth-century German composer Robert Schumann in 1850, Fellows's instrumentation follows Schumann's slightly halting, dampened piano voicing — musicologist Wolf-Dieter Seiffert calls it "introverted and restless" (par 1) — but adds a sonorous cello. It is likely that Schumann's piece was inspired by Goethe's poem/song "Frühlingsorakel," or "Spring Oracle," from his collection *Gesellige Lieder* (*Convivial Songs*), which opens with the lines: "You prophetic bird, you. / Blossom singer, Cuckoo!" The cuckoo is a storied bird in many cultures and traditions: in ancient Greek mythology, when Zeus assumes the shape of a cuckoo in order to ravish Hera; in the Book of Leviticus, where the cuckoo is called an "abomination among fowls" (11:16); as a motif of insanity in the American novel and film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; and in both Chinese and Western traditions as "the harbinger of spring" (Lai 530). As the herald of spring, the cuckoo is known as the prophet of both new life and, as per the passage of time marked by the cuckoo clock, a misleadingly cheerful reminder of mortality. In Goethe's song, the prophet-bird twice entreats the listener to "Listen!" — to listen more closely, more attentively — to the sounds of spring, as they mark the beautiful and sickening passage of time. In Schumann's

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[83] The lowercase text styling and paragraph formatting, rather than standard line breaks, follow the liner notes of *The Last One Standing.*

"Vogel als Prophet," the composer does not attempt to recreate the onomatopoeic, eponymous call of the cuckoo, but instead "opens the true listener's ears to the essence of hearing" (Seiffert par 6), thereby inviting the listener to imagine, if not experience, what it might be like to transcend human meaning making.

When Fellows writes about birds, she often pairs her avian lyrics with images of windows.[84] Like McKay's porches, windows are at the threshold between the inside and outside, human and nature; they serve as both an opening and a barrier, a transitional mechanism in a liminal space.[85] In Fellows's song "Sunrise" (*Roses on the Vine*), for example, the speaker invites the auditor to "Throw open that window wide … if we can't believe in one another, might as well concede defeat and lock the shutters … Turn up the sky. Turn it up. Let the bird sing." In "Migrations" (*Paper Anniversary*), the speaker describes a "Scarecrow in a pale dress, face pressed on this greasy gas station window[86] … Under her breath she says: Won't you pick me up? I'm light as a feather … Blackbird on a hydro wire plummets." Every one of the stop-motion videos Fellows created to accompany the songs on *Stuff We All Get* feature images of birds and windows — birds flying through windows, into windows, or waiting at the window.

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[84] *invisible string:* "We'd turn and watch our city sprawl and send us signals in the glow of night windows" (the Weakerthans, "Night Windows," *Reunion Tour*).

[85] *invisible string*: "Gazed out through the window at the parking lot … ducked behind the drapes when I saw the moon begin to rise" (the Mountain Goats, "You or Your Memory," *The Sunset Tree*).

[86] *invisible string:* "We press our heads against the glass. Cold. Clear. Stars" (Fellows, "Aquarium," *Stuff We Get.*)

If the porch is the ear of the house, the windows might most obviously be configured as the eyes, yet windows do not only mediate the visual, but also the audible. Though windows, whether open or shut, do not occlude visual interchange between the inside and outside, a closed window does muffle sound. In other words, though a human occupant might be able to see out of a closed window, we open windows in part to be able to listen to the outdoors. Windows, particularly when open, pose a potential security risk, and yet we choose them over the more certain security of a solid wall not only for increased ventilation and "to better let the light seep through" ("Vertebrae," *Paper Anniversary*) but also to listen to the world beyond our walls. As the narrator states in the title track from *Nevertheless,* "Windows break and windows fix … They're just letting in a little light. They're just letting in a little air." A window gives humans on the inside the illusion of safety and protection from the incursion of wilderness outside, a thin, breakable membrane that shakily marks the divisions of the world. Clear-glass windows also pose a reciprocal risk to some denizens of the wilderness, with birds and insects regularly mistaking windows for open space and smashing their bodies against the glass in full flight.

In "bird as prophet," the human narrator and "bird" exchange perspectives on the threshold between them. The song opens with the sounds of chaotic birdsong (not recognizably emanating from an asylum of cuckoos[87]) paired with a soft, squeaking melody that sounds like a tuneful window being opened and shut, or a loosely fitting screen door blowing back and forth on its hinges. These largely natural sounds fade out just as the piano and cello fade in; the soft, gradual, but marked auditory distinctions are drawn between the two sound spaces. The first lyrics describe bird's initial arrival: "bird came to my window and said, what? you let me in there

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[87] An asylum is, delightfully, the collective noun for a group of cuckoos.

once now what the hell? what i wouldn't give for arms to hold you. we are creatures of such like desire." In these lines, bird longs to access the interiority of the narrator, attempting to enter both their home and their heart. Rebuffed by the glass but still able to see inside, bird begins the song by challenging the division between the human and nonhuman worlds embodied by the window. In an inversion of the common human desire for wings, bird wishes instead for "arms to hold you," longing to express the commonality of their desire through shared physical gesture.

Rather than opening the window to allow bird inside, however, the narrator apologetically refuses its entreaties: "i said sorry but i didn't mean it then. now i know that i am sorrier than i have ever been." A bird at a window is often a sweet image,[88] a gentle collision of human and nature. In fact, we draw birds to our windows with feeders and perches to see and hear them more closely. It is a different story, however, when a bird comes *through* a window; the bird is at best a food-stealing, excrement-dropping nuisance, and at worst a danger to itself via encounter with other closed windows, furniture, or domesticated pets. In "bird as prophet," while the narrator "let [bird] in there once" before, they are now "sorry" that they allowed the boundary of the window to be transgressed. More than a practical safety concern, the speaker seems to deeply regret allowing bird to cross the threshold between nature and human; they are "sorrier than [they] have ever been" not only that bird has now developed a taste for the indoors, but also that, contrary to the incomprehensible birdsong from the opening notes, bird and human are now somehow communicating in a shared language.

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[88] With the obvious exception of the titular "Raven" in Edgar Allen Poe's poem, who not only gains access to the narrator's home through a window but is also, like Schumann's bird, decried as "'Prophet! … thing of evil! — prophet still, if bird or devil!'"

In the second verse, the narrator makes the first of two shifts in pronouns that they use when describing the subject of the song, from "bird" to "you." With this turn to increasingly personal language, the speaker is addressing bird not only as a representative example of the class *Aves*, but as an individual, which is a mode of address that humans generally reserve either for each other or for our domestic companion animals. In this verse, the speaker recalls their initial encounter with bird, when it "flew around [the speaker's] kitchen drunk and wild" during a "fevered" night. The speaker recounts their first moment of physical contact, during which bird simultaneously longed to return to the wild and also relied on human intervention to facilitate its release: "I held out my hand and there you landed, and begged for me to put you back outside." The speaker repeats their first apologetic chorus at this point, doubly "sorrier than [they] have ever been" to have broken the barrier between wilderness and the domestic through both language and physical touch.

The slippage in pronouns moves a step further in the latter two lines of the second chorus. While it is clear in the first line that bird is speaking to the narrator, in the second it is ambiguous who is addressing who: "you said lately i've been doubtful of the spring. you should stay right here and i'll take care of everything." In the first line, bird questions its own abilities to prophesy spring. Following cuckoo lore, this line seems to identify bird's species as a cuckoo: the cuckoo is reputed to be the harbinger of spring because cuckoos only sing in the springtime. If bird is doubtful of spring, perhaps it has not yet begun its seasonal singing. That bird is somehow talking to the narrator, therefore, is even more significant: not only is bird communicating with a human (even going to far as to mimic colloquial human speech such as "what the hell"), but it is also vocalizing for the first time in close to a year.

In this song, bird is speaking not just to other birds and to the natural world about the coming of spring, but to a human being whose life indoors is far less dictated by and dependent on the changing of seasons. The second line of the song's final chorus further erodes the gulfs between bird and human, indoor and out: while the meaning of the line shifts depending on the speaker's identity, it is equally feasible that either party delivered the line. If the narrator tells bird, "you should stay right here and i'll take care of everything," then the narrator is, despite their likely kind intentions, reinforcing a paternalistic, interventionist model of "caring" for wild animals by bringing them inside a domestic space. If bird is the one delivering the line, however, the caregiving power dynamic of the two characters' relationship is inverted: bird reassures the human narrator that, despite its doubts, it will *take care* of the coming of spring, reasserting its capabilities to understand and intervene in the natural world in ways that are inscrutable to humans.

The final lines of "bird as prophet" mirror the structure of the opening verse, but the relationship between the two characters is entirely rearticulated. The song closes with the lines: "bird flew through my window and said look at me. i have flown right through this glass unscathed. but bird, i cried, that window was wide open. then it stared right through me in the strangest way." In these lines, bird becomes strange, or other, to the narrator once again. Bird believes that it has managed to traverse the barrier between them, flying *through* the glass window. Once the narrator tells bird that the window had been open, however, there is a moment of mutual defamiliarization; the narrator, for the first time, refers to bird as "it," and bird "stare[s] right through [the narrator] in the strangest way." Bird's previously intelligible communication is replaced with the weird, penetrating gaze of the other — both a strange, sad loss of connection and a necessary return to the natural. It is, oddly enough, not until this final

line that the narrator notes the strangeness of their communication with bird. Prior to this, an uncharitable listener might have suggested that the narrator had *gone cuckoo* — but in these final moments, the fundamental, mutual unknowability between human and wild animal is restored; an impenetrable barrier stronger than any glass window. As Fellows puts it in her song "To a Prize Bird" (*Nevertheless*), named after a poem of the same title by Marianne Moore: "You are unknowable. You are one who's declined to split into two. … To a prize bird you could sing. But raising your voice underlines how alone you are. Brazen claws staunch in defeat."[89] In "bird as prophet," Fellows does not attempt to (re)make the unknowable into something knowable; instead, she invites the listener to pay close attention to the impenetrable song of birds — to linger in the disquiet of being on the other side of the window.

"Remember the day you graduated to unusual from strange":[90] Conclusions

In her generous, self-deprecating lyricism, exuberantly experimental approach to poetic form and musicality, and focus on small stories about people and creatures on the margins, Fellows pairs a precise, measured poetics with an irreverent, exuberant sense of humour. The seventh track on the vinyl version of *Roses on the Vine*, for example, reads in entirety: "Who sends a letter-bomb in place of a letter? All it takes is a letter to reach someone. And you're done" ("All it Takes"). Fellows is both a ruthless editor (she once earnestly told me that "everything is revealed in editing!") and deeply invested in a poetics and aesthetics of the disorderly and handmade. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her turn to handmade collage;

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[89] Fellows also quotes the last line of Moore's poem, "Brazen claws staunch in defeat."

[90] Christine Fellows, "Face Down, Feet First," *Paper Anniversary*

though new shapes and images are often revealed as others are carefully cut away, collage does not attempt to feather the harsh lines of layers, but rather builds unlikely congruities in the contrasts of their accumulation. As this chapter has argued, her collage practice is also evidenced in her songs; in her embrace of the residual, Fellows foregrounds the frayed edges of the sonic, archival, environmental, and social, and sings the people and creatures that live at these margins *into the light*.

Chapter Three

"I am gonna make it / through this year / if it kills me":[91] Listening to John Darnielle's Listening on *The Sunset Tree*

Dedicated to any young men and women anywhere who live with people who abuse them, with the following good news:

you are going to make it out of there alive

you will live to tell your story

never lose hope

(John Darnielle, *The Sunset Tree* dedication)

In this chapter, I listen to the cross-pollinating, intimate links between listening to music, making music, and narrating selfhood in John Darnielle's 2005 autobiographical album *The Sunset Tree* with his band the Mountain Goats. I contend that listening to Darnielle's narratives about listening render his lyrics into metareferential (Wolf), autodiegetic texts that position attentive listening as a way to preserve or imagine tenuous, recalcitrant hope for the future. While the album resounds with Darnielle's trauma, including being abused by his stepfather as a child and becoming addicted to methamphetamines as a teenager, *The Sunset Tree* also begins to sound possible ways to "make it" through and beyond trauma — *making it* signifying both survival and creation.

Forming the etymological root of poetry, the Ancient Greek *poïesis* (Gk. *poiein*, ποιεῖν) translates primarily as "to make," with the additional connotations of "to create," "to compose," and "to do*."* Jonathan Culler describes the lyric (as in lyric poetry) as performative rather than

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[91] the Mountain Goats, "This Year," *The Sunset Tree.*

descriptive, a "ritual that seeks to make something happen" (125). While making and writing — poems, but also songs — are inextricably linked, this chapter argues that positioning attentive listening as a kind of making, or making sense from sound, illuminates how sonic space becomes one in which the listener can hide, heal, or transform. *The Sunset Tree* imagines and enacts making, even and especially as it draws the listener's attention to the conditions of its own creation. In this chapter, I listen to my own listenings; I de- and re-construct the ways in which I listen to *The Sunset Tree* and the resonances I hear with theories of trauma, theories of listening, theories of the lyric, and narratology to make a responsive, resonant record of my own attentive listening to an album that I have "lean[ed] in close to" ("Dance Music") for fifteen years.

Darnielle slips frequently between past and present tense in his storytelling throughout *The Sunset Tree*, oscillating between positioning himself as the adult storyteller, authoritatively recounting his childhood from the detached, relatively safe space of a recording studio, and as a fellow listener, still living through, listening to, and singing the soundtrack of his violent childhood. Consistent with theories of trauma which posit that the retelling of trauma challenges the semiotic capacities of language,[92] *The Sunset Tree* is both an assemblage and an undoing: the attentive listener is invited to piece together an overarching narrative of the album from disordered fragments of memory and parable. The album begins in the aftermath of trauma with Darnielle's twenty-one-year-old persona alone in a motel room in Los Angeles, loosely contemplating suicide, and ends many years after the rest of the album's events, with Darnielle singing tenuous, conditional forgiveness following his stepfather's death. In between these bookended tracks, Darnielle offers glimpses of the events of his childhood, sometimes from so

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[92] See especially Caruth and Kirmayer.

far away that his lyrics are almost gestural, yet more often from so excruciatingly close up that the songs sound more like paratactic lists of objects and fragments of dreams than structured narratives meant to convey a cohesive story.

Throughout *The Sunset Tree,* there is a slippage of pronouns and subject positions with the lyric and listening I. These slippages alternate between a close, first-person, present-tense narrative that sounds like Darnielle is directly addressing the listener — "Alright, I'm on Johnson Avenue in San Luis Obispo and I'm five years old, or six maybe" ("Dance Music") — and a distant, more amorphous perspective that shifts between multiple points of view ("Up the Wolves," for example, shifts in its three verses between second, third, and first points of view). While this album is explicitly autobiographical, Darnielle's "*personnage*" (Lejeune) does not always fulfil the "contract" (Grace 68) of autobiography, which promises the truthfulness of the story within its pages or performance. Instead, Darnielle's lyric persona is slippery and sometimes unreliable, the traumas shaping his narrative leading to the fragmentation and dissociation of the album's lyric and listening I. While this chapter sometimes refers to the first-person narrator of *The Sunset Tree* as "Darnielle," it does so with the full knowledge that his persona is fractured, misleading, and constructed.

I hear the careful construction of *The Sunset Tree*'s studio production as consistent with literary theories of trauma, particularly as they relate to autobiographies of abuse: for trauma to be speakable (or writeable, or singable), it must be reconstituted, its fragments reinscribed with agency. Assembling and reconfiguring the narrative of one's autobiography into a record (in both senses of the word) of abuse can therefore be a way of wresting control over one's own narrative — of re-making it. *The Sunset Tree* is both a raw, urgent, and close reckoning with Darnielle's personal trauma and, at the time of its release, one of his most audibly constructed albums.

Marking a major stylistic departure from twelve of Darnielle's previous fourteen albums with his band the Mountain Goats, *The Sunset Tree* was recorded in a studio with a full backing band rather than in Darnielle's home on a buzzing boombox. While in many cases audible "residues of process" (Fellows), such as tape-hiss or live-off-the-floor banter, can call listeners' attention to the materialities of a track's production, in this instance, Darnielle's pivot away from audible liveness invited long-time fans of the Mountain Goats to listen in a new way, to listen to carefully assembled, deliberate recordings that meditate on the connections between meticulously *making* the album and attentively *listening* to it.

As evident in the album's dedication,[93] however, which offers the album "to any young men and women anywhere who live with people who abuse them," *The Sunset Tree* is also an outward-facing artifact, one that invites listeners to listen so that they might receive the "good news" that they, too, "will live to tell [their] story." Shortly after the album's initial release, Darnielle self-released a second version comprised of the original home-demo recordings of most of the songs on the album, some with altered lyrics, and an additional three tracks that did not make it onto the first version. Letting the audience *listen in* to his process, including editing, track selection, and sequencing, draws further attention to the construction and constructedness of Darnielle's autobiographical storytelling. Operating as an invitation for both new listeners and long-time fans dubious of Darnielle's shift to studio recording technologies to join the community of listeners making *The Sunset Tree,* Darnielle titled the second version of the album *Come, Come to the Sunset Tree* (2005). On both versions, Darnielle dramatizes individual

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[93] Transcribed in this chapter's epigraph, otherwise found only on physical copies (CD, vinyl) of *The Sunset Tree.*

listening and shared listening, narrating moments from his own life when he listened to music in a meta-musical reflection on the power of song. Darnielle's songs about listening ask the listener to perform two tasks simultaneously, one practical and one imaginative: listen to the song at hand and imagine the feeling of listening to the song being described. Through his invitation to partake in real and imagined listening, Darnielle positions himself as a co-listener, and thereby co-maker, or part of a larger community engaged in the process of listening and/as making.

I see the creation of this larger community of listeners and makers as an act of hope for a transformative future. Indeed, Darnielle's songs that are explicitly about listening to and making music are also the tracks that begin to locate hope amidst the horrors of his childhood. In the podcast *I Only Listen to the Mountain Goats* hosted by Joseph Fink and Darnielle, Darnielle identifies making and listening to music as twin forces that saved his life, both as a young person in a violent household and as an adult reckoning with trauma. Finding hope in even the idea that others might be listening to the same music, Darnielle imagines both listening to and making music as fundamentally communal and connective activities, even when they are practiced in isolation. Identifying the singer as a co-listener and the attentive listener as a co-creator gives each person experiencing the piece of music a new, doubled agency, wherein listening creates meaning as much as sound invites listening.

Darnielle's envisioning of this virtual togetherness is notable given the contemporary shift towards increasingly isolated contexts of listening. In the podcast, Darnielle is cautiously nostalgic: "music especially has always been communal … recorded music is a very strange blip. Prior to the invention of recording, nobody ever would have thought, I'm going to go home and listen to something by myself. Listening was something you did together" (Fink and Darnielle, "Best Ever"). Darnielle's comments are consistent with histories of sound by contemporary

musicologists; in his introduction to *The Sound Studies Reader,* for example, Jonathan Sterne explains how sharing encounters of sound outside of concert settings have become rare. With the proliferation of personal music devices, and especially now with on-demand music streaming services, music is increasingly consumed through individual sets of headphones.

On *The Sunset Tree*, however, it is paradoxically through listening to music "alone" "in my room with the headphones on" ("Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod") that Darnielle first begins to form an obstinately hopeful dream for future salvation, and maybe even community. On the first episode of the podcast, Fink and Darnielle are joined by a guest contributor, American novelist John Green, to discuss the ways music can provide refuge and community. Green is a long-time fan of the Mountain Goats particularly because he "always [feels] *heard*" when he listens to their music ("Best Ever"; emphasis added). Darnielle is reflective about the ways in which music can listen back to the listener, ultimately declaring that music is "a communal exercise, even if it takes place in solitude. Which is why … in my music, there's people who are by themselves reaching out to some place beyond." In Darnielle's music, that "reaching out" is embodied and reciprocal, a haptic listening experience in which the music is itself listening and conscious of being listened to.

In this way, the process of communal attentive listening and meaning making traces back to Darnielle's childhood. "When I was a child," he notes on the same episode:

> reading the authors that I loved and listening to the music that I loved, the thing that I got from that is [the feeling] of being understood somehow by a stranger, and that weird connection, where it's not the person, it's not the stranger, it's the thing they've *made* that opens the space for self-reflection, for being able to see yourself through an outside eye. (emphasis added)

Darnielle's sense of the "weird" here is intriguing, suggesting that there is something uncanny in the simultaneous distance and proximity enacted by attentive listening; listening can make you feel closer to an imagined community, and particularly to the person from whom the sound originated (in this case, the musician), but also farther, or more removed, from yourself ("see[ing] yourself through an outside eye"). On *The Sunset Tree*, the "weird" doubleness of listening is dramatized in the tracks "Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod" and "Dance Music" respectively, in which music both offers refuge for aspects of Darnielle's fragmented self that he wishes to keep separate and safe ("I'm in my room with the headphones on, / deep in a dream chamber"), and grants him a place within a larger imagined community ("I don't want to die alone … / When the police come to get me / I'm listening to dance music").

Though the title of Darnielle and Fink's podcast, *I Only Listen to the Mountain Goats,* began as a self-deprecating joke on Darnielle's part, the podcast meditates on the modalities of listening as it relates to fandom, creation, and identity formation, and revolves around the central conceit of listening together. In the opening sequence to the podcast and in the descriptive blurb posted on the podcast's website, Fink and Darnielle describe *I Only Listen to the Mountain Goats* as a discussion of "what it means to be an artist, a fan, and, as many people are, both at once." Throughout the first season of the podcast, Fink and Darnielle listen to and discuss the Mountain Goats' 2002 album *All Hail West Texas,* covering one track per episode. For the first half of each episode, Darnielle and Fink talk mostly about the stories behind the lyrics, the production decisions that were made, and Darnielle's musical, literary, personal, or political influences at the time that he wrote the track. In the second half of the episode, a guest musician is invited to join the conversation and to share a cover version of the song under discussion. In almost every instance, Fink introduces the artist and asks them to talk about their experiences of listening to

the Mountain Goats — first as a fan and fellow musician, and then as someone engaged in the process of covering the track, another form of remaking. Sometimes, the artists produce fairly faithful cover versions, but in most cases, they create radically different tracks, which remake Darnielle's lyrics and music in ways that invite listeners familiar with the original tracks to re-listen to a re-listening. In one case, guest artist Julian Koster from the Music Tapes and the Orbiting Human Circus (Of Air) recorded an instrumental cover of the track "Jeff Davis County Blues," playing several interlocking synth tracks in place of the song's lyrics. When covering a lyric-forward band like the Mountain Goats, omitting the lyrics might have felt like a loss. Instead, however, I hear Koster's version of "Jeff Davis County Blues," the lyrics of which narrate a recent ex-con's lonely drive out of and back to Texas, as a meditation on the ways in which trauma and loss can strain the limits of language.

"You or Your Memory":[94] Thresholds of Existence

In the second season of *I Only Listen to the Mountain Goats*, which unpacks the production of the Mountain Goats' 2019 album *In League With Dragons*, Darnielle discusses the transformative possibilities and concomitant dangers of making. Referencing Maurice Blanchot's theory that the "self is erased in self-expression," Darnielle says:

> When you decide to make stuff, you become complicit in the remaking of yourself in a way you may or may not have thought through. But you will make a new "you" through the stuff you make. You'll learn more about the you that was already there, and then you will be reshaped by the stuff that you make. ("Going Invisible 2")

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[94] "You or Your Memory," *The Sunset Tree*

Integral to Darnielle's concept of making is newness — not necessarily in terms of whole-cloth creation, but of transformation, or reshaping. In this way, Darnielle's concept of making and "making it" connect to *poïesis,* a transformative making, one that creates something new (poetry) out of something existing (language). Heidegger describes *poïesis* as a "bringing-forth" — an emergence, blossoming, or unfolding of a thing from itself, or that which "brings out of concealment into unconcealment" (287). On *The Sunset Tree*, there are multiple moments in the lyrics that describe and enact emergence or "unconcealment": the wriggling evolution of the subject in "Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod," the change from "see[ing] things as in a mirror, dimly" to "see[ing] each other face to face" in "Love Love Love," and the titular "Pale Green Things" "coming up through the cracks" in the album's closing track. In recounting my attentive listening to each of these tracks, I too am "bringing forth" these songs and reshaping their language to make my own listening record.

The opening track on *The Sunset Tree*, "You or Your Memory" narrates the liminal space of a Heideggerian threshold occasion, or "a moment of ecstasis when something moves away from its standing as one thing to become another" (Cox and Theilgaard 23). *Ecstasis* (from the Greek *ekstasis*) specifically refers to the threshold of the self, "to be or stand outside of yourself" ("Ecstasis") — or, as Darnielle puts it, "When you make stuff, something happens to your self; you become external to yourself in some way" (Fink and Darnielle, "Going Invisible 2"). In "You or Your Memory," both the narrator, Darnielle's persona, and the auditor, Darnielle's stepfather, are poised at the threshold of potential transformation. The narrator is lingering on the cusp of suicide, attempting to step outside of himself to "see the real truth about [himself]," while the auditor is somewhere between an embodied presence ("you") and a disembodied, spectral figure ("your memory"). The live self-editing that the speaker performs in the song's

chorus distills the moment of the auditor's transformation from presence to memory — of simultaneous bringing forth and abjection — when the speaker lists the "supplies" that he has gathered to facilitate his potential suicide: "St Joseph's Baby Aspirin, / Bartles and Jaymes, / And you, / Or your memory." It is unclear whether the speaker's titular correction ("you / Or your memory") is comforting or forlorn; whether he has summoned the specter of his stepfather as witness and companion to his suicide (as Darnielle sings on another song on this album, "I don't want to die alone" ["Dance Music"]), or whether the looming memory of his stepfather is one of the "supplies" needed for his suicide. Like his other supplies, which include low-dose aspirin and sugary, low-alcohol wine coolers, the speaker's desire for suicide seem to waver at the threshold between hopeless conviction and a weak desire for salvation.

There is an ongoing trope of liminality in "You or Your Memory." The song opens with the lyrics, "Checked into a bargain-priced room on La Cienaga, / Gazed out through the curtains at the parking lot." Cheap motel rooms are recurrent settings in Darnielle's lyrics (for example, in the songs "San Bernardino" [*Heretic Pride*], "Psalms 40:2" [*The Life of the World to Come*], "Palmcorder Yajna" [*We Shall All Be Healed*], and "Letter from a Motel" [unreleased song]), their fundamental transience serving as a situated metaphor of uncertainty, impermanence, homesickness, or loneliness. In the opening lines of "You or Your Memory," the liminality of the speaker's setting is reinforced by the second action that he describes; while gazing out of a window through curtains, the curtained window becomes both the frame of his vision and the mediated barrier between the inside and outside. When he ventures out of his room, it is to "walk down to the corner store just before nightfall in [his] bare feet." The speaker's location at the tripled threshold of a motel room window at twilight prefigures the song's central questions: what is the difference between *you* and *your memory*? Put differently, which version of the other

do we carry with us in the aftermath of trauma, and how do we represent them in art? Can *your memory* be as, or even more, powerful (or harmful) than the embodied *you*? And, lastly, if the line between *you* and *your memory* is blurred, can there be a similar divide between ourselves and the idea or image of ourselves that we make in art, particularly in autobiography?

The narrator of "You or Your Memory" spends most of the song attempting to not only look at but see himself, as if from the outside — as if, in other words, through a process of ecstasis. In the first verse, the speaker returns from his walk to the corner store, "spread[s] out [his] supplies / On the counter by the sink," and pauses to "look [himself] right in the eyes." In this instance, the speaker's mechanism for seeing himself is to look directly into the eyes of his own reflection in a mirror, simultaneously creating and acknowledging two selves: his embodied self and his specular simulacrum. Yet when the speaker says, "[I] looked myself right in the eyes," he is looking at a mediated representation of himself. According to Jacques Lacan, recognition of the image of oneself in a mirror — what he terms the "mirror stage," or *state du miroir* (*Écrits* 1) — is both one of the hallmarks of early childhood development and an ongoing element of structuring subjectivity. For Lacan, seeing yourself in a mirror is fundamentally alienating because it creates two separate versions of the self: the self that you feel and inhabit, and the self that you see and which is other due to its presentation outside of yourself (*Seminar*).[95]

In the penultimate track of *The Sunset Tree*, "Love Love Love," Darnielle returns to the idea that seeing yourself, or "each other," in a mirror is doomed to alienating distance: "Now we

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[95] This segmentation of the self in some ways prefigures Mol and Law's tripartite taxonomy of the enacted body; the body we have, the body we are, and the body we do (45).

see things as in a mirror, dimly, / Then we shall see each other face to face." This line is paraphrasing Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (New International Version). The speaker's attempt to see himself in the mirror in "You or Your Memory" therefore fails; as in "Love Love Love" and Corinthians 13:12, it is not until he turns both inwards and to God that he is able to truly see, and therefore know, himself.

In the second verse of "You or Your Memory," the speaker abandons his efforts to see himself in a mirror in favour of imagining a vision of himself from the inside out. The verse's imagery reinforces this inward turn; though the verse once again opens with the narrator at the motel room window, in this instance the narrator, "ducked behind the drapes when [he] saw the moon begin to rise" in an evasive maneuver, as if avoiding being exposed by the light of the moon. In a similar attempt to evade exposure, in the second verse, the narrator "gathered in [his] loose ends, switched off the light."[96] Only once the narrator has constricted both his real and metaphorical fields of vision is he able to see himself, for the first time in the song: "And down there in the dark I could see the real truth about me, / as clear as day." Juxtaposing the darkness and depth of his current situation (alone in a dark motel room, deep in suicide ideation) against the aspirational clarity and light of "the truth," the narrator decides that even a devastating true vision of the self is, unlike the alien simulacrum of a reflected or constructed self, worth living for.

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[96] Spotify incorrectly notates this line as "switched on the light" — online versions of song lyrics are frequently, frustratingly incorrect. I transcribe these lyrics from the album liner notes.

Following, or perhaps as part of, his vision of "the truth," the narrator turns to God for deliverance: "Lord, if I make it through tonight / Then I will mend my ways, / And walk the straight path / To the end of my days." Having completed his profane barefoot pilgrimage to the corner store for wine coolers and baby aspirin in the first verse, the narrator now seeks instead to "walk the straight path." The phrasing of these lines again alludes to The Bible, with both the narrator and the auditor ("you") as possible stand-ins for "wicked men":

> Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse, who have left the straight paths to walk in dark ways, who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil, whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways. (Proverbs 2:12–15)

Having seen himself from the outside in a moment of ecstasis, the narrator now petitions God for a covenant: his survival through the night in exchange for a lifetime spent walking "the straight path." The narrator's bargain is both a plea and an offer, once again playing on the doubleness of the phrase *make it* to alternately signify survival and creation. Indeed, there are two ways to read the speaker's covenant. In the first, he asks God to ensure his survival through the night in exchange for lifelong fealty. In the second, the speaker takes on an additional, more active role, offering to take the new truth that he has learned about himself and *make it* into art.

The latter way of reading the speaker's petition evokes a promise of Christian witnessing, of spreading the "good news" (as in the album's dedication) of his deliverance through a proverbial dark night of the soul. Two of the verses from The Bible that most explicitly instruct the faithful to witness their faith also centre on the verb "to make": "[g]o and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) and "[i]n your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason" (Peter 3:15). In both cases, the

scripture emphasizes transformation of the self, from non-belief to discipleship, and from doubt to faith. Though ecstasis is often associated with existentialism, it is also Biblical: religious ecstasy is characterized by a shifting of awareness from the external to the internal, or spiritual, sometimes accompanied by a vision of God. Like the auditor in "You or Your Memory," then, God is simultaneously present and absent, both evidently shaping the narrator's "path," past and future, and a silent, spectral figure.

"So this is what the volume knob's for":[97] Listening Through Trauma

Darnielle has played thousands of live shows over the years, and many of his setlists are archived on online fan pages like *The Mountain Goats Wiki.* Some songs from Darnielle's extensive discography are regular crowd favourites, while others are rarely or never played live. Several of Darnielle's most popular songs from *The Sunset Tree* almost never make appearances in live sets, perhaps because they remain too painful to perform. Many of his songs bear witness to violence and trauma, and while some offer healing, redemption, or at least a kind of anesthetic to both the singer and the listener, others seem to re-wound. Darnielle's use of present-tense narration, time shifts, and pronoun slippage suggest that the traumas he is describing remain alive and ongoing. In the demo version of "Lion's Teeth" from *Come, Come to the Sunset Tree*,[98] for example, Darnielle speaks into the mic in the third person just before beginning to play,

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[97] the Mountain Goats, "Dance Music," *The Sunset Tree*.

[98] *Come, Come to the Sunset Tree* is not available on streaming services such as Spotify, as it was a limited release. You can find versions of it online on places like *SoundCloud.*

saying, “This is a hard song for John to play.” The album’s closing track, “Pale Green Things,” has only been played live eight times in the nearly twenty years since its release.

Though music can wound, it can also be a tool of life-affirming distraction. “Dance Music,” the fifth track from *The Sunset Tree*, reflects on Darnielle’s discovery of the transformative possibilities of listening to music. In this song’s tightly packed first-person, present-tense narration, Darnielle (re)witnesses his stepfather’s reign of terror over his childhood home. The setting of a house or home, Jeanne Perrault and Marlene Kadar suggest in their introduction to *Tracing the Autobiographical*, can extend the “metaphorical authority” of “location”: “[w]hen location is the intersection of individuals and the laws that control their lives or the violence that shatters lives, their auto/biographical texts open new ways to comprehend interpellation and agency” (4). In “Dance Music,” Darnielle describes his mounting childhood realization that “there’s something wrong with our new house” and gestures to the ways he attempted to regain agency. Emphasizing the narrativity of his lyricism, Darnielle begins by directly addressing the listener and identifying the time and place of the narrative: “Alright I’m on Johnson Avenue / in San Luis Obispo / and I’m five years old or six maybe.” Darnielle’s opening, “Alright,” has the quality of one taking a deep breath before starting to tell a long or difficult story, gathering one’s thoughts and making sure the listener is at attention. With Darnielle’s typical economy of language, the next lines grant the listener access to both the historical era that the story is set in and the central *agon* of the song:

> Indications that there’s something wrong with our new house
>
> trip down the wire twice daily.
>
> I’m in the living room watching the Watergate hearings
>
> while my stepfather yells at my mother,

launches a glass across the room straight at her head,

and I dash upstairs to take cover.

Even before reaching the brief chorus, Darnielle's precise, present-tense diction emphasizes the precarity and potential explosiveness of his household's mediated communication. "Trip down the wire" evokes the wire-tapping connotations of the concurrent broadcast of the Watergate hearings, but it also suggests that communication between the adults and children in the house is a covert, rigidly hierarchical affair.

When the mediated distances of television, wires, and yelling are broken by the brutal physicality of Darnielle's stepfather "launch[ing] a glass across the room[,] straight at [his mother's] head," Darnielle invokes adjectives associated with active war zones to describe his retreat: his stepfather "launched" a missile, so he "take[s] cover" upstairs. There, he encounters his only defense: "[I] lean in close to my little record player on the floor. / So this is what the volume knob's for. / I listen to dance music." In keeping with the song's paradoxically cheerful, upbeat piano music, Darnielle "leans in close" to his record player and blasts generically inappropriate "Dance Music" to replace sounds of conflict with the sounds of celebration. Though music cannot entirely shield Darnielle from his stepfather's wrath, it offers temporary sonic passports to other places, emotions, and narratives. It offers, in other words, hope, and a glimmer of someplace else. When Darnielle "leans in close" to the dance music, he is straining towards a different kind of listening — an intentional, focused, attentive listening.

The description of a five- or six-year-old Darnielle leaning into his "little record player on the floor" is affectively striking; the image of a young child huddling over his record player, trying to get physically closer to the sound to escape the noise of the conflict permeating his home life and the life of the nation is steeped in pathos. When the narrator describes his next

formative instance of listening to "Dance Music" in the second verse, however, he has become a less immediately sympathetic character. Beginning again with a conversational tone, this time Darnielle is slightly defensive while he sings, "Okay so look I'm seventeen years old, / and you're the last best thing I've got going. / But then the special secret sickness starts to eat through you, / what am I supposed to do? / No way of knowing." Drug addiction and mental illness form two thematic threads throughout this album, with Darnielle speaking openly in interviews about his history of addiction to methamphetamines. In contrast to the "straight path" he seeks in "You or Your Memory," in "Dance Music," the narrator "followed [his lover] down [her] twisting alleyways, found a few cul-de-sacs of [his] own." The narrator is convinced that he will end up precisely where he does at the opening of the album, in "You or Your Memory": "There's only one place this road ever ends up / and I don't want to die alone." There is a tragic inevitability to listening to the stubbornly upbeat, hopeful tone of "Dance Music," which falls chronologically before the events of "You or Your Memory" but comes after it in the album's track listing.

In the second verse of "Dance Music," the speaker addresses the auditor, a troubled love interest, with a combination of urgency and tenderness. Like the first verse, this narrative juxtaposes a sad, sordid personal story against the outward ebullience of dance music. "Let me down, let me down, let me down gently," Darnielle sings, "When the police come to get me, I'm listening to dance music." In this anaphoric phrase, Darnielle shifts the tenor of blame away from the auditor; as opposed to his violent stepfather in the first verse, there is a gentleness to this betrayal. While he waits for the police to come arrest him for an undisclosed, likely drug-related crime, the persona listens, once again, to "Dance Music." This time, however, he is not huddled

on the floor, but has regained some agency — he waits for "the future to arrive" ("Woke Up New," *Get Lonely*) and listens to dance music.

"I am gonna make it":[99] Singing, Listening, Making the Future

The third track on *The Sunset Tree*, "This Year," is a belligerently, desperately hopeful anthem with a fan-favourite sing-along chorus: "I am going to make it / through this year / if it kills me." "This Year" recounts the events of a tumultuous Saturday when Darnielle was "seventeen years young" and "[breaks] free" from his troubled home in the morning, gets drunk and plays video games with his girlfriend through the afternoon, and drives recklessly back to the chaos and violence of his home in the "California dusk." Operating around the central contradiction of surviving at any cost, even death, the narrator of "This Year" simultaneously inscribes the future with hopeful potential for transformation ("my broken house behind me and good things ahead") and seems convinced that he may not survive long enough to experience the promised land ("ready for the bad things to come … the scene ends badly as you might imagine"). A strident meditation on the fragile, vital necessity of hope, "This Year" imagines what making it — making narrative, making music, and making it through and beyond trauma — might sound like. In "This Year," Darnielle takes a simultaneously retrospective and future-oriented, mechanistic approach to constructing and salvaging hope.

The first two verses of the song pair images of a triumphant escape with an unreliable getaway vehicle. In the first verse, the narrator sings: "I broke free on a Saturday morning, / put the pedal to the floor. / Headed north on Mills Avenue, / listened to the engine roar." Here, the

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[99] the Mountain Goats, "This Year," *The Sunset Tree*.

narrator breaks the bonds of his "broken house"[100] by stealing his stepfather's car and speeding away from his problems at home. The engine's "roar"[101] sounds a similar rebellion, insolently chorusing with the narrator's escape as he floors the gas pedal. In the second verse, the car's voice becomes even more present, the narrator singing, "My broken house behind me and good things ahead, / a girl named Cathy wants a little of my time. / Six cylinders underneath the hood crashing and kicking, / Aha! listen to the engine whine." Darnielle's "Aha!" can be read in three ways: as a throwaway, filler sound between syllables; as an obliquely onomatopoeic representation of the engine's "whine"; and/or as an "Aha!" moment, during which the persona comes to the resolution that he restates in each of the choruses: "I am gonna make it / through this year / if it kills me." In this verse, the narrator slips from past into present tense, and, instead of recounting his own listening, directs the listener to "listen" to the "whine" of the engine. The shift from "listened" to "listen," particularly when combined with the exclamatory "Aha!", increases the urgency of the directive. In asking the listener to "listen" alongside the narrator's listening, the line between the human and machine in this song begins to blur: the listener is directed to attend equally to the narrator's words and the car engine's declamations, the simultaneous violence ("crashing," "kicking") and juvenile complaint ("whine") of the engine echoing the narrator's affect.

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[100] Darnielle's use of "broken house" rather than the more common "broken home," which colloquially refers to a family in which the parents are separated from one another, further underscores the persona's feeling of disaffection.

[101] Which also prefigures the lion's roar on the song "Lion's Teeth."

In the verses following the first chorus, the speaker recounts playing video games and drinking scotch with his girlfriend, "Cathy." As he plays, he "hurts [his] knuckles punching the machines," belying either an overly passionate and aggressive playing style or, more likely, the fact that he uses the physical interactive features of retreating into playable narrative worlds as a way of expressing his simmering and otherwise silenced anger. Several lines later, the speaker refers to himself and Cathy as "twin high maintenance machines." In softening the line between human and machine once again, Darnielle foregrounds the self-destructive elements of this persona; when he pushes the car engine to its limits or punches the video game controller, he is inflicting a simultaneous violence against himself, alluding to the ultimate act of self-destruction in "You or Your Memory." The narrator's desire for self-destruction is especially apparent in the bridge, during which he drives home drunk and imagines the violence of the reception awaiting him: "I drove home in the California dusk / I could feel the alcohol inside of me hum / Pictured the look on my stepfather's face, / ready for the bad things to come." Darnielle's use of the word "hum" again erodes the distance between human and machine; depending on the reading of the line, the alcohol humming inside of the narrator could either sound a warm, human resonance, or hum like an engine.

The apparent inevitability of the "bad things to come" as the narrator arrives home gives context for the urgency and violence of his earlier behaviour, recasting the entire day as a viciously temporary, high-stakes respite from the ongoing violence of his "broken house." In the final verse, the narrator describes his brutal homecoming, again punctuated by the increasingly urgent exclamations of his car: "I downshifted as I pulled into the driveway, / The motor screaming out, stuck in second gear." Downshifting can often cause an engine to sound a complaint, so the narrator defiantly harnesses the voice of the personified engine to scream an

impudent announcement of his return home. In his drunken state, however, the motor becomes "stuck in second gear." Being stuck in second gear, which allows the car engine to travel only at relatively slow speeds, is a metaphor for the persona's abbreviated escape; though he wants to "put the pedal to the floor" and permanently roar away from him home, he is doomed, for "this year" at least, to increasingly agitated slow orbits. Although being stuck travelling at a slow speed is frustrating for the speaker — you certainly can't roar off down a highway while stuck in second — it also allows him just enough imaginative scope to plan his future escape, "next year."

The penultimate lines of the final verse include the song's second moment of direct address to the listener: "The scene ends badly, as you might imagine, / In a cavalcade of anger and fear." "Cavalcade" again underscores the connection between the emotional and the mechanical, with the personified "anger and fear" processing like an affective motorcade. In both Darnielle's use of the word "scene" and his explicit request for imaginative empathy from the listener, he breaks the song's fourth wall, thereby increasing its narrativity. Part of the hopefulness obliquely inscribed in this album's dark stories of violence and childhood abuse emerge in the songs' quality as stories; Darnielle did, in fact, make it through those hard years, has lived to tell the tale, and is now designing the parameters through which he constructs and sounds his stories.

The final line of the closing verse connects this song to an ancient, emblematic narrative of deferred hope: "There will be feasting and dancing in Jerusalem next year." This line evokes the Jewish diasporic concept of *L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim*, or "Next year in Jerusalem," a prayer repeated at the end of every Passover and Yom Kippur as both a reminder of exile and hope for future homecoming. For Darnielle's persona, who has repeatedly voiced his desire just

to “make it through *this* year,” this final evocation of “next year” takes on a mythic quality; he imagines life outside of his stepfather’s house, no matter its conditions, to be akin to the “feasting and dancing” associated with a long-awaited and paradoxical homecoming. Though the song already describes a homecoming — the persona leaves and returns “home” over the course of a day — he feels exiled and alien within the walls of his home due to his stepfather’s ongoing violence; a sense of home cannot be found inside his family’s house. In this way, “This Year” echoes the narrator of the Mountain Goats’ song “Riches and Wonders” from 2002’s *All Hail West Texas*, who sings, “I want to go home / but I am home.”

It is relatively rare for a song in the Mountain Goats’ catalogue to have a repeating chorus, particularly one as direct as “This Year’s” three-line, declamatory chorus, “I am going to make it / through this year / if it kills me.” In these lines, which stand out in present tense against the largely past-tense backdrop of the verses and bridge, Darnielle invites the listener to consider the material and imaginative conditions of “making it.” A more grammatically correct chorus might read, “I am going to make it / through this year / if it doesn’t kill me,” with “it” referring to the narrator’s stepfather’s reign of violence, anger, and fear — but the sentiment offered in the colloquial chorus is more complex. There may well be metaphorical “feasting and dancing” on the other side of “This Year” once the narrator turns eighteen and is free from his stepfather’s dubious care. On the other hand, like the parable, his hope might turn out to be eternally deferred; always just ahead, “next year.” “This Year” is a mostly past-tense narrative about what “making it” sounds like in the present: the only way to arrive at the future is to “make it” (there).

"Hoping you don't break my stereo":[102] Wriggling Towards Hope

"Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod," the ninth track on *The Sunset Tree*, sounds both a caution and a prayer. Though the song tells the story of a moment of violent abuse in Darnielle's persona's childhood home, when he feels like is being drowned under waves of despair, it begins to sound the slow growth of quiet, creeping resilience. Like the tetrapod, the speaker warns, which is one name for the first four-limbed creatures to complete the massive evolutionary shift of emerging from the ancient sea, "one of these days / I'm gonna wriggle up on dry land." The title references The Bible passage Job 1:8, in which God says to Satan, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?" (*King James*). Shortly following this passage, God gives Satan permission to test Job's faith by destroying his land and possessions, as long as Satan does not "put forth [his] hand on [Job's person]" (*King James,* Job 1:12). In "Hast Thou," Darnielle's persona's faith is tested when his stepfather, manifesting evil, "blaze[s] down the hall" to beat him. Instead of hoping to protect his "person" from his stepfather, however, the speaker primarily hopes that his stepfather doesn't "break [his] stereo, / Because it's the one thing that [he] couldn't live without." The Biblical phrasing of the title, combined with the reference to evolutionary biology, lends to Darnielle's narrative of his teenage suffering a kind of dignity, transforming his painful coming of age into something approaching a hero's journey. The narrator's projected evolution in this song is another example of ecstasis, a bringing forth of an aspirational, transformed self that will wriggle out from his stepfather's violent control "one of these days," perhaps even "next year."

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[102] the Mountain Goats, "Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod," *The Sunset Tree*.

Set when Darnielle is thirteen or fourteen, "Hast Thou" is another deceptively straightforward narrative of a particularly bad day in Darnielle's childhood home when he accidentally wakes his stepfather from a nap. Again, Darnielle's persona turns to music to escape his circumstances, this time listening "with the headphones on" and retreating deep into his imagination: "And alone in my room, I am the last of a lost civilization, / and I vanish into the dark, / and rise above my station." The speaker's fantasy of "ris[ing] above his station," which again emphasizes the pseudo-militaristic power structure in his home, is interrupted by his stepfather waking from his nap. The blissful solitude that the speaker had been feeling, where he had "vanished" so thoroughly from view that he could become untouchable,[103] is infringed upon by the all-too-real body of his stepfather, whose hands are described on this album variously as "strong and thick-veined" ("Hast Thou") and "paw[s]" ("Lion's Teeth").

In this moment, Darnielle narrates the agony not only of suffering abuse at the hands of his stepfather ("held under the smothering waves by your strong and thick-veined hand"), but also the agony of interrupted listening. Having sought and found refuge in the imaginative soundscape provided by music, Darnielle's persona has only one wish as his stepfather beats him: "and then I'm awake and I'm guarding my face / hoping you don't break my stereo, / because it's the one thing that I couldn't live without / and so I think about that, and then I sorta black out." These lines reflect the escalating violence that Darnielle experienced, but also his growing conviction that music was, somehow, going to be his ticket out of his situation. In the recorded version of "Hast Thou," Darnielle's vocal delivery is casual, uninflected by audible

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[103] *invisible string*: "Someday I'll be big enough that you can't hit me / and all you're ever gonna be is mean" (Swift, "Mean," *Speak Now*).

affect, as if Darnielle is so accustomed to these kinds of abusive interactions that he can deliver the facts of the event in dispassionate present-tense, first-person narration. Darnielle takes what are often the most emotionally laden forms of narration — first person, present tense, autobiographical, song lyrics — and deliberately subverts their conventions in his lyrical delivery. Like the tetrapod, he does eventually wriggle out of his stepfather's grasp and emerge onto dry land, and we, the listeners, are active participants in his transformation. In the act of listening to adult Darnielle's narratives, we both bear witness to his continued survival and, on a practical level, financially support Darnielle making more music.

"We hold on / for dear life":[104] "Lion's Teeth"

In the disjointed, out-of-order narrative arc of *The Sunset Tree*, "Lion's Teeth" (track eight) comes before "Hast Thou" (track nine), and similarly describes a moment in which Darnielle's persona attempts to "rise above [his] station" "in a dream." In "Lion's Teeth," as opposed to "Hast Thou," the speaker describes his stepfather in third person rather than via direct address. When playing it live, Darnielle often introduces "Lion's Teeth" as a "revenge fantasy" (*The Mountain Goats Wiki*). While the song certainly envisions a violent altercation between Darnielle's persona and his stepfather, the lyrics stop short of offering conclusive, satisfying revenge or closure. Instead, "Lion's Teeth" fantasizes about survival — "hold[ing] on," or making it, through a particularly brutal bout of abuse.

Echoing "This Year," "Lion's Teeth" also features discord in and around a car located on the driveway of the persona's childhood home. Like "Hast Thou," the violence explodes

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[104] the Mountain Goats, "Lion's Teeth," *The Sunset Tree*.

immediately after the persona awakens his stepfather from a nap. Unlike the other two tracks, however, the narrator in "Lion's Teeth" imagines what it might be like to be able to protect himself. Rather than a dream of enacting reciprocal violence on his abuser, the narrator's "revenge fantasy" is a desperate daydream about possessing power and agency. In one live introduction to the song, Darnielle said that "Lion's Teeth" is "a song about the sort of things you think about wishing you could do when you are utterly powerless and you're seventeen or sixteen and it's tough" (*The Mountain Goats Wiki*). At the end of the song, the characters remain in a stalemate, "hold[ing] on" to the precarious balance of power "for dear life." Though there is violence inscribed in the hold, it is also possible to read the narrator's "fantasy" of achieving a state of mutual, desperate clinging as a dream of "hold[ing] on" until "Jerusalem next year": if only he can "hold on / for dear life," he might just "make it through this year" ("This Year"). In both songs, the life-or-death stakes of the persona's repeated affirmations of endurance are clear; he must "hold on" or "make it" through to survive.

Throughout "Lion's Teeth," the speaker's stepfather is personified as a lion with "long, sharp [teeth]" and "paw[s]." The opening lines of the song are reminiscent of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," a song by Solomon Linda with lyrics later added by George David Weiss, which repeats the line, "In the jungle, the mighty jungle, the lion sleeps tonight." In "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," though the lion is sleeping "near the peaceful village," the speaker comforts the auditor by telling them, "Hush my darling, don't fear my darling / The lion sleeps tonight." In other words, though there is a dangerous predator in the vicinity, it is not only located safely outside of the village, but it is asleep, and so rendered temporarily powerless. Though in other songs Darnielle's persona has actively avoided waking his stepfather, with varying degrees of success, in "Lion's Teeth," the speaker deliberately wakes the "lion" to force the other members of his

household, who he characterizes as silently complicit in his ongoing abuse, to "own up to the truth."

Indeed, the song opens with Darnielle's persona agency on full display. "Lion's Teeth" starts with the lines, "The king of the jungle / was asleep in his car. / When your chances fall in your lap like that / You've gotta recognize them for what they really are." Instead of slinking past the car and seeking refuge in the "peaceful village" of his room, listening to music and imaginatively "ris[ing] above [his] station" ("Hast Thou") like the narrator's younger self might have done, his seventeen-year-old self is keen to beard the proverbial lion. While he describes his stepfather's awakening as a painful inevitability in "Hast Thou" ("But you do wake up, and when you do / You blaze down the hall and you scream"), in "Lion's Teeth," the speaker deliberately ensures his stepfather's wakefulness: "I crawl in shotgun and reach into his mouth / And grab hold of one sharp tooth / And hold on / For dear life / I hold on." The narrator's description of his movements as "crawl[ing]," evocative of early childhood ambulation, starkly juxtaposes his stated destination: "shotgun." While "crawl[ing] in shotgun" is a colloquial description of sneaking into the passenger seat of his stepfather's car, it is also an early instance of the song's increasingly violent diction, in which the space of the family vehicle becomes fraught with the danger of a figurative loaded gun.

In personifying his stepfather as a lion, the narrator deliberately dehumanizes him and renders his violent outbursts as crude and animalistic. Juxtaposed against the domestic, suburban setting of their Southern California family home, a lion is monstrously out of place. In another act of revenge, the speaker uses the power of metaphor to recast his stepfather as a wild, carnal interloper, and positions his own young teenage self as a sacrificial lamb who has finally reached the end of his tether. In terming his stepfather "The king of the jungle" in the first line, the

speaker similarly intimates that, while his stepfather may have temporary dominion over their home, his crown is ill-begotten — a lion might be fit to rule a jungle, but his bloody leadership style is grossly disproportionate to a family home. The lion's inherent power is so much greater than those he terrorizes that his efforts appear all the more cowardly.

When the speaker says that he "grabs hold of one long sharp tooth" of his lion-stepfather, therefore, there are several ways to hear the line. The first is to take the image literally within the storyworld that Darnielle has created. Since this song is a revenge fantasy, it is possible that the fantastical elements continue through the characterization, and the lyrics invite the listener to imagine a teenage boy grabbing hold of a sleeping lion's closest canine tooth and holding on "for dear life." If we understand the lion characterization to be more zoomorphic, and the persona's stepfather is merely like a lion in relative size, ferocity, and wild unpredictability, then the object of the persona's grasp becomes more amorphous. Grabbing hold of a lion's tooth might make it temporarily more difficult for the lion to use his most deadly weapons against you, but the rage it is sure to provoke would likely outweigh any initial benefits. Similarly, therefore, while we cannot be sure of exactly what Darnielle's persona might have grabbed hold of if his stepfather was human in this scenario, the goal and results are the same: the narrator deliberately enrages his stepfather. Not only does he purposefully wake his stepfather from a nap (the consequences of which will be "hell to pay," as we know from "Hast Thou"), but he presses his advantage to seize the power and "hold on." Though "there's no good way to end" the confrontation, at least the persona will have focused the attention of his mother, sister, and the "cops" on his stepfather's violence, hopefully forcing them to "own up to the truth" by speaking aloud and naming the abuse.

Once the speaker's stepfather wakes up, "his paw hits the horn." This honk of protest and rage is the first in a series of compounding sounds described in the song; the tense silence of the sleeping stepfather's vehicle is shattered by car horns, threats ("I am gonna regret / The day that I was born"), "screaming," sirens ("In come the cops"), "wailing," and "the lion['s] roars." The explosion of noise causes the persona's mother and sister to "rush out to the driveway," and they only add to the cacophony ("Everyone's screaming"). As the frenetic sounds both within and outside of the vehicle escalate, the narrator and his stepfather remain locked together inside the car, the strain of "hold[ing] on" threatening to weaken the speaker's grasp: "And my arms get sore / And my palms start to sweat / And the tears roll down my face / 'Til my cheeks are hot and red and soaking wet." Darnielle uses the conjunction *and* five times within the space of four short lines, adding to the language of accrual mounting throughout the song, in which sound, violence, and witnesses assemble around the persona and his stepfather's central grasping *agon*. The speaker's weakening physical state and increasing agitation emphasize the real threat of what might happen if he is the first to let go: in an ominously thrumming backdrop to the song's narrative, he repeatedly tells us that he is holding on "for dear life."

When the police arrive on the scene and find the narrator and his stepfather locked in combat within a locked vehicle, they treat the scene if it were the site of a serious car wreck in which the doors have been jammed shut by the force of a collision. This portion of the narrative is delivered in just four succinct lines, but, like the vivid description of the narrator's weakening physique, they emphasize the passage of time and ratchet up the tension: "In come the cops / They blowtorch the doors / I start wailing / The lion roars." The gridlocked mortal combat occurring inside the car may yet be broken up when the police open the doors and wrench them apart, but "Lion's Teeth" stops short of narrating resolution to the conflict. Instead, in a moment

that both reflects the opinions of the assembled crowd of characters and seems to directly address the listener, Darnielle sings: “There’s no good way to end this, / Anyone can see. / There’s this great big you / And little old me / And we hold on.”

Reaching beyond the moment of crisis it describes, the ending of “Lion’s Teeth” envisions the narrator and his stepfather continuing to be locked together in deadly combat, at least until “next year.” Though there is an obvious stark power imbalance between the persona and his stepfather, their mutually violent clinging, in which they each attempt to hold an advantage over the another at any cost, threatens to end in mutually assured destruction. In this way, the song echoes the final stanza of Yeats’s poem “Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers,” the last of his “Crazy Jane” ballads from *Words for Music Perhaps*: “Did he die or did she die? / Seemed to die or died they both? … / Love is like the lion’s tooth.” “Lion’s Teeth” recasts Yeats’s dancers as a teenage boy and his stepfather, but their close, violent hold evokes a similar kind of brutal, constricting embrace, in which the threat of death (“died they both?”) is equally present (“we hold on / for dear life”). The question of whether “Love” is at the root of the relationship between Darnielle and his stepfather is more complicated — though Yeats describes a sharp, vicious love “like the lion’s tooth,” it is difficult to say whether there is love present at all between Darnielle’s two characters. In the overall narrative of *The Sunset Tree*, Darnielle’s seventeen-year-old persona is certainly unable to approach the tentative forgiveness that his adult self locates in the album’s closing track, “Pale Green Things.”

Even more explicit than the Biblical reference that closes “This Year,” in “Lion’s Teeth,” the Book of Daniel becomes a key intertext. Perhaps in part because of the near homonym of Daniel/Darnielle, the narrator seems to identify with the hopeful righteousness of Daniel’s story, the parable suggesting that God will provide deliverance to those who place their trust in Him. In

Chapter Six of the Book of Daniel, Daniel accidentally crosses the king and is thrown into the lion's den to meet his fate. Since Daniel has remained faithful to God, however, God delivers him by sending an angel to close the jaws of the lions: "My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt" (6:21). In this line, Daniel humbly suggests to the king that since God has found him innocent, the king might follow suit.

Though Darnielle does not assert his own innocence in "Lion's Teeth" other than highlighting the power discrepancy in the lines, "There's this great big you / And little old me," there are several moments on the album when he does align his childhood self with Daniel's innocence, for example on "Hast Thou," when he sings, "I am young and I am good." Like the promise in "This Year" of "feasting and dancing in Jerusalem next year," in "Lion's Teeth," the speaker seems desperate to invoke the Biblical assurance of good being rewarded and evil being punished. Darnielle's persona places tentative faith in God for deliverance from his leonine stepfather, if only he can "hold on" or "make it" long enough. Though the song does not offer as clear a resolution as Daniel's deliverance from the lion's den, the dream-like quality of the revenge fantasy gives the song the feeling of an unfinished parable, in which a deeply troubled hero faces his own lion's den and holds on, with only the faintest of hope for deliverance. Whether he makes it through the encounter or not, however, Darnielle's teenage persona is determined to *hold on* to what little agency he can muster, even at the price of knowingly entering the "lion's den."

“At last. At last?”:[105] Weak Growth in “Pale Green Things”

The closing track on *The Sunset Tree*, “Pale Green Things,” is set many years later than the other tracks, shortly before Darnielle wrote the album. Operating as a bittersweet epilogue to Darnielle’s stories of the abuse he suffered as a child, “Pale Green Things” recounts snippets from Darnielle’s relationship to his stepfather as an adult, up to and including the aftermath of his stepfather’s death. “Pale Green Things” is more oblique in its storytelling than many of the other tracks on *The Sunset Tree,* perhaps in part because Darnielle was writing it only months after some of the events it describes (“just last December”), rather than upwards of two decades later. Darnielle has played “Pale Green Things” live only eight times releasing it; in an interview with *3:AM Magazine*, he explains its rare presence on setlists by saying that the song is both his “favourite” and “the deepest down [he has] ever reached” (O’Brien). The track offers partial closure to both the album’s narrative arc and to Darnielle’s complex affective relationship with and to the man who both raised him and consistently abused him.

“Pale Green Things” begins by evoking the first pleasant memory with Darnielle’s stepfather that the listener has been granted access to thus far on the album. Darnielle describes a quiet early morning at the racetrack with his stepfather, watching the “horses run their workouts.” Though the song does not give a timeline for the events it describes in the first two verses, other than that they take place “shortly after [his stepfather’s] first heart attack,” it seems likely that the journey to the racetrack occurs after the events of “You or Your Memory.” The opening verse and chorus offer a combination of gentle and violent diction, the pleasant image and rolling assonance of “riding with the windows down” contrasting with the sharp plosives and

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[105] the Mountain Goats, “Pale Green Things,” *The Sunset Tree*.

pain of “your first heart attack.” Since the phrase “your first heart attack” implies that Darnielle’s stepfather will go on to suffer additional heart problems, this line also foreshadows the possible cause of his death in the third verse.

Though Darnielle’s description of his stepfather is overall much softer in this song, there is still a latent violence in the depiction of his movements, for example, he “crack[s] asphalt underfoot” as he walks. As a result of the pavement being cracked open by being repeatedly trodden upon, however, it has opened up, and new spaces have been created: “Coming up through the cracks / Pale green things, / Pale green things.” Reminiscent of the Japanese art form of Kintsugi, in which artisans repair broken pottery with lacquer infused with gold, there is the suggestion that, though the asphalt is broken, something new — and maybe even something beautiful — now has the space to emerge from between the cracks. The tentative, fragile hope in this image also evokes the chorus of Leonard Cohen’s “Anthem”: “There is a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.” It is possible to read the pale new shoots of growth, rising “lonely and frightened” from the cracks in the asphalt, as analogous to *The Sunset Tree.* On this album, Darnielle’s songs emerge, some brashly and some tentatively, from the metaphorical cracks that were stamped into him after years of being downtrodden by his stepfather. Asphalt is present in both the opening and closing tracks of this album; as freshly laid and impressionable “Black tarry asphalt, soft and hot” in “You or Your Memory” and as aging and brittle “cracking asphalt underfoot” in “Pale Green Things.” In the opening song, the narrator walks barefoot over treacherous, amorphous ground whose burning heat and cloying softness add pathos to his heartbreaking trip to buy “supplies” for suicide. In “Pale Green Things,” however, the hardened

and cracked asphalt not only conveys the passage of time, but also the coolness and openness of new growth, new shoots of possibility fertilized by sadness and trauma.[106]

In the song's second verse, Darnielle moves from describing the particulars of the morning he and his stepfather shared at the racetrack ("You held your stopwatch in your left hand / And a Racing Form beneath your arm") to a present-tense description of the way his current self interacts with the memory of that morning. In the second chorus, Darnielle sings: "Sometimes I'll meet you out there / Lonely and frightened. / Flicking my tongue out at the wet leaves / Pale green things." These lines hold the most densely figurative language in the song and offer some insight into the complexity of Darnielle's ongoing relationship with the memory of his stepfather. The line "Sometimes I'll meet you out there" suggests that Darnielle still revisits this moment in his mind, locating the memory of his stepfather frozen in this particular moment, "Casting [his] gaze way out to no man's land." Describing the infield of the racetrack as "no man's land" echoes the militaristic language present in earlier songs, once again reminding listeners that this early morning racetrack meeting is based upon a conditional, tenuous treaty between two bitter enemies. The second line, "Lonely and frightened," could equally apply to Darnielle or his stepfather. Either Darnielle revisits this moment when he is feeling "Lonely and frightened," or Darnielle's memory of his stepfather in that moment is of him friendless and afraid. If the latter reading holds true, then this line represents the first time on this album that the listener is witness to Darnielle's stepfather feeling something other than anger. It simultaneously humanizes Darnielle's stepfather, and also reverses his and Darnielle's subject positions from

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[106] *invisible string:* "Allow the hope that we will meet again out in the winter wheat" (Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*).

when Darnielle was a child: where once Darnielle was made “Lonely and frightened” by his stepfather’s domestic reign of terror, now Darnielle imagines and remembers his stepfather as alone and afraid, thus further destabilizing his posthumous power.

In the third line of this chorus, Darnielle sings, “Flicking my tongue out at the wet leaves, / Pale green things.” This line shifts away from the largely realist narrative of the song thus far, and suggests that when Darnielle visits his stepfather at this moment in his memory, he envisions himself as a proverbial snake in the grass. Again, Darnielle places himself underfoot, in a simultaneously submissive and threatening posture — easily crushable, but also in possession of potentially poisonous fangs. I also hear this moment as a continuation of the warning in “Hast Thou,” that “one of these days / [he is] gonna wriggle up on dry land.” In “Pale Green Things,” Darnielle’s persona has indeed wriggled out of the grasp of the lion’s hold, and even though he is still on “wet leaves” rather than having achieved the true safety and deliverance of “dry land,” a snake represents a point considerably further along in the evolutionary process than the humble tetrapod. As a metaphorical snake, the song’s narrator builds a sensory map of the “pale green things” he encounters with his forked tongue. If we continue to read the “pale green things” as analogues for the songs on *The Sunset Tree*, then Darnielle’s snake is finding protection in and amidst the art that he is creating — allowing Darnielle to revisit the painful memories through the mediation of not only time, but also music.

In the final verse and chorus, Darnielle describes the moment in which he learned of his stepfather’s death: “My sister called at three a.m. / Just last December. / She told me how you’d died at last. At last? / And that morning at the racetrack was the one thing I remembered.” In the first line, Darnielle conveys the urgency and vital importance of the news to his family — even though nothing would have changed had Darnielle’s sister waited until morning to relay the

news, she called in the middle of the night to tell him. While the passing of a (step-)parent is always major news, however, the doubled "at last" that conclude the following line changes the tone of the urgency from sad news to long-awaited, maybe even welcome, tidings. The central ambiguity in Darnielle's repeated, faint question — "She told me how you'd died at last. At last?" — forms the emotional heart of this song. Is Darnielle's persona glad that his stepfather has died? Is he sad? Does he support, resent, or question his sister's use of the phrase "at last" in her announcement of their stepfather's death? Could all the above be true simultaneously?

Darnielle's evocation of multilayered, contradictory emotions in this moment reflects the complexity of facing the death of a formerly abusive family member as an adult. How do you mourn your abuser? In a 2013 podcast interview, Darnielle describes the battling affects of this moment: "I don't wish death on anybody, [but] it is wonderful when your abuser dies. … It's like you are free. There's a feeling that you will never be free of what you were … But to know that the person who used to hurt you no longer can is very, very, very deep. It's unbelievable" (Maron). The final line of this verse, "And that morning at the racetrack was the one thing I remembered," offers some tentative hope for forgiveness, even in the face of these complexities. If Darnielle can both focus on the memories of his stepfather that he wants to hold closest and regain control of the narrative of his childhood by writing *The Sunset Tree*, perhaps he can find some peace, or at least crack open a space where the pale green shoots of growth and forgiveness might be viable.

In the song's final chorus, the speaker wrestles with his conflicting emotions around the death and memory of his stepfather: "I turned it over in my mind / Like a living Chinese Finger Trap. / Seaweed and Indiana sawgrass, / Pale green things, / Pale green things." The "it" in the first image could refer to Darnielle's stepfather's death, but in the context of the previous verse,

"it" seems to connect specifically to his memory of "that morning at the racetrack." A Chinese finger trap is a cylindrical toy that, if you place a finger in either end, seems to "trap" them there. The harder you pull your fingers apart, the more constricting the tube becomes, such that the only way to escape is to counter-intuitively relax the fingers toward each other. The Chinese finger trap is a commonly used metaphor in therapy for the idea of relaxing into a problem or painful memory to find clarity around it. In this chorus, Darnielle adds the word "living" to the trap, implying that his memories of his stepfather, which are as alive as ever despite his stepfather's death, are both treacherous — they might "hold on for dear life" — and manageable if only he finds a way to relax into them. Unlike Darnielle's stepfather, his memories, and the traps therein, remain "alive," which simultaneously leaves room for growth and forgiveness and continues to threaten. Even in this final track, Darnielle wrestles with the question of whether revisiting memories, particularly in songs, immortalizes or destabilizes his stepfather's posthumous power over him.

The final image of the song offers yet a third way to envision the titular "Pale Green Things." Before he repeats the title twice in a row, Darnielle sings, "Seaweed and Indiana sawgrass." Like the other "pale green things" in the song (shoots "coming up through the cracks" and "wet leaves"), seaweed and Indiana sawgrass are also plants, yet specifically plants that, like Samson's "Winter Wheat," can grow in hostile conditions — underwater or in watery marshlands respectively. Like seaweed, sawgrass is plentiful and invasive, but unlike seaweed, it has developed the ability to grow on both wet and dry lands, as well as the defense mechanism of sharply serrated leaves. In this way, the two plants also mimic the amphibious evolutionary process of "wriggl[ing] up on dry land" described in "Hast Thou Considered the Tetrapod," in which the narrator fiercely imagines adapting from his initial lifeform as a defenseless child,

confined to the oppressive underwater world of his family's troubled home ("held under these smothering waves"), to a fully grown adult, able to defend himself on "dry land." Beyond the natural images evoked by the phrase "pale green things," however, like the car in "This Year," Darnielle mixes the registers of the metaphor by the inclusion of the word "things." "Things" is a capacious word, an open-ended category of categories, in which not only plants, but also ideas of newness, growth, hope, and maybe even forgiveness, might cluster. "Things" might even contain the songs on *The Sunset Tree* — "pale green things" that somehow, too, find "a way to rise" (Samson, "Winter Wheat").

***Come, Come to the Sunset Tree*: Conclusions**

The Sunset Tree is fragmentary and out of order, but also accumulative, the sediments of trauma lingering like sand clinging to a new life form first attempting to wriggle out of the sea. Darnielle simultaneously pieces together and dismembers memory and narrative, radically making and remaking his autobiography through stories he sings in his own voice. Though there is an element of willful escapism to Darnielle's listening practices as a child and teenager, the music he creates as an adult explicitly asks the listener not to turn away, but to listen and bear witness to his stories. "Lean in close to [your] little record player on the floor," the songs seem to be asking, for there is hope here.

In stark contrast to the Mountain Goats' twenty-four-and-counting other albums, *The Sunset Tree* is an explicitly personal collection of the stories that Darnielle has "live[d] to tell" (album dedication). It is important to him that people listen — so important, in fact, that he recorded a second version of the album. *The Sunset Tree* was the Mountain Goats' first studio album and represented a sonic shift away from the low-fi, DIY recording aesthetic of their

previous work. Some fans were disappointed in the new sound and refused to listen to the album. In response, Darnielle recorded another version of the full album on a cassette recorder, released it for free, and titled it *Come, Come to the Sunset Tree.*

The titles of both versions of the album, *The Sunset Tree* and *Come, Come to the Sunset Tree,* reference Samuel Butler's posthumous 1903 novel *The Way of All Flesh*. Butler's partially autobiographical novel narrates an abusive relationship between a father and son. In a scene from the protagonist's childhood, his father beats him when he is unable to pronounce the hard C in the first lines of the hymn, "The Tyrolese Evening Hymn":

> Come, come, come,
>
> Come to the sunset tree,
>
> The day is past and gone;
>
> The woodman's axe lies free,
>
> And the reaper's work is done.

The protagonist, Ernest, had been asked to choose a hymn, and despite his apparent speech impediment, he chose "The Tyrolese Evening Hymn" because "the tune was rather pretty and had taken [his] fancy, for he was unusually fond of music and had a sweet little child's voice which he liked using" (Butler 223). In another parallel, this time to "Lion's Teeth," later in the novel, Ernest relates how he used to recite the lyrics of a hymn to describe his father as a lion to his unsympathetic, "didactic" siblings:

> Come, and I will show you what is strong. The lion is strong; when he raiseth himself from his lair, when he shaketh his mane, when the voice of his roaring is heard the cattle of the field fly, and the beasts of the desert hide themselves, for he is very terrible. (Butler 239)

In linking his narratives of childhood abuse to both The Bible and a major work of turn-of-the-century literature, Darnielle finds strength and solidarity in accumulated stories of trauma — the "good news" of survival shared through storytelling. In this fragile, belligerent album, Darnielle's voice emerges remade as an adult making and sharing his story on his own terms.

In the album's dedication, Darnielle offers the album to "any young men and women anywhere who live with people who abuse them, with the following good news: *You are going to make it out of there alive. You will live to tell your story. Never lose hope.*" Echoing "This Year," Darnielle offers listeners hope in the form of making — for Darnielle, survival and storytelling are inextricably linked, and to "make it" is, at its core, surviving in order to voice your own story to an attentive listener. Just below the dedication, Darnielle writes, "Made possible by my stepfather, Mike Noonan (1940–2004): may the peace which eluded you in life be yours now." By explicitly naming his stepfather and bracketing his life with the years of his birth and death, Darnielle contains and takes measure of his abuser's life — a final reckoning that repurposes his cruelty into art. In this moment of fraught interpolation, Darnielle again centres the idea of making: while his stepfather, Mike, made possible this story by creating abusive conditions of his childhood, Darnielle himself made it through trauma in order to make this album, thereby remaking his story. As an adult with a family of his own and as a successful musician, Darnielle has indeed *made it* — he has "live[d]to tell [his] story" and "never [lost] hope" — and we, the listeners, are *hear* to bear witness.

Chapter Four

Listening "for the hope of it all":[107] Finding Myself with the National and Taylor Swift

"If I stay here, trouble will find me.

If I stay here, I'll never leave."

(the National, "Sea of Love," *Trouble Will Find Me*)

The first three chapters of this dissertation were written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, to the extent that they operate as autoethnographies of recuperative listening, focus on albums and artists that were central to my life up until that point. Near the end of 2019, I was working on my final chapter about one of these artists, American experimental rock band the National. I first listened to the National in 2012 while I was unhappily completing master's coursework at McGill University in the deep of a Montréal winter. I was homesick for the West Coast, and lyricists Matt Berninger's and Carin Besser's line "it takes an ocean not to break" ("Terrible Love," *High Violet*) sounded like it might smooth my fractures. The loneliness ever-apparent in their narrators' voices was assuaged by what I heard as their recalcitrant hope for attenuated connection. Despite the band being affectionately dubbed music for "sad dads" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads"), the middle-aged melancholy in their lyrics lent me, a sad twenty-two-year-old graduate student, a new map for survival. Phoebe Bridgers, a frequent collaborator with

[107] Swift, "august," *folklore.* Note that Swift stylizes the album titles *folklore* and *evermore* in lower case, as well as their track titles.

the National[108] and one of my all-time favourite musicians, suggests that the overlap between the band's core demographics of "middle-aged men and teenage girls" is their common interest in "the act of finding yourself, and being kind of self-conscious" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads"). Finding and being conscious of the self are, perhaps not coincidentally, the focuses of this chapter. I resonated both then and now with one of Berninger's and Besser's speaker's assertions that the way to make it through hard times is to "hold ourselves together with our arms around the stereo for hours" ("Apartment Story," *Boxer*). The only way through our shared sense of "Sorrow" (*High Violet*) is to *share it* — in my case, through rigorously attentive listening. Somehow, between the sprawl and specificity of the National's music and lyrics, I always had the clear sense that the narrators listened back.

By the time I started to write about the National in earnest in 2019, however, I couldn't hear the hope in their words anymore, and nor could I hear the self-aware humour in the grandiosity of their "Sorrow" (*High Violet*). In 2013, the National played "Sorrow" live at MoMA PS1 approximately 105 times over the course of six hours, creating a film in collaboration with Icelandic artist Ragnar Kjartansson that was aptly titled *A Lot of Sorrow*. When I tried to watch the film in 2019 in preparation for writing this chapter, I only made it about twenty-five minutes in before I had to stop, truly overwhelmed by *A Lot of* [My Own] *Sorrow*. In the wake of a sequence of trauma that I kept locked in anxious secrecy, I couldn't

[108] And, later, a collaborator of Swift's on the song "Nothing New" (*Red [Taylor's Version]*) and an opener for twelve dates of the Eras Tour.

bear the possibility that, in listening to the National's grief,[109] I might hear enough of my own that I could no longer insulate myself nor others from it. My writing at the time brooded over the morose, irredeemably shattered self I listened for in Berninger's and Besser's lyrics to the point that my project about hope started to sound like a project about despair. Take, for example, the following paragraphs, excerpted from the first draft of this chapter:

> Berninger's and Besser's narrators are brutally ashamed of their solipsism, uttering lines like, "I've got it worse than anyone else / And I just can't find a way to forgive myself" ("You Had Your Soul With You," *I Am Easy to Find*), and they are resignedly wretched in their isolation: "I would always be light years, light years away from you" ("Light Years," *I Am Easy to Find*). As in the title of the National's sixth studio album, the Grammy-nominated *Trouble Will Find Me* (2013), many of Berninger's and Besser's speakers feel that they have a target on their back; they uneasily imagine themselves as the centre of everyone's attention and are both gratified and mortified by the exposure.
>
> Though they are constantly searching and vying for closeness, these characters are unable to find a way to be close to other people that isn't either stifling or removed. Every attachment described in these songwriters' work is anxious, brittle, and impossibly high stakes, as in the song "Heavenfaced" (*Trouble Will Find Me*): "No one's careful all the time / If you lose me, I'm gonna die." Berninger's and Besser's characters are rarely likeable, perhaps in part because they present unflinching self-portraits of the most

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[109] On their album *Laugh Track*, the National sings about the striking relationship between music and grief: "Radio's painful, the words are clipped / The grief it gets me, the weird goodbyes" ("Weird Goodbyes feat. Bon Iver").

> selfish, mean, and mediocre aspects of themselves as they navigate uncomfortably relatable human experiences. These characters vacillate between pompous, defiant aggrandizement of their pain and pathetic appeals for deliverance. They simultaneously fear exposure and long for recognition, engaged in a constant, fruitless search for others even as they resent how easy it is for others to find them. Many of Berninger's and Besser's narrators feel constantly exposed, and further open themselves to scrutiny — to being found, or even *found out* — by singing their stories into the dark for anyone to hear. These songs are sonic self-vivisections, shouted and sung with the gruesome optimism that, in the echoes that resound from the sounds of their pain, they might be able to construct a sonic map of the gulf between themselves and their loved ones.

Then — for a long time — I couldn't work anymore. Then — much worse — I could barely listen to music. Trauma had finally taken from me the very balm I had always used to soothe it.

The advent of the pandemic coincided with the beginning of my long journey with EMDR therapy,[110] the sessions of which I took from the bathroom floor of the studio apartment I shared with my partner, laptop perched on the toilet, legs going numb under me against the tile floor. The bathroom was the only place I had to go with a door, which is as fitting a metaphor as any for how I felt at the time, trapped in the same cage as my own brutal memories. Living

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[110] Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy, described in brief here by the American Psychological Association: "[u]nlike other treatments that focus on directly altering the emotions, thoughts and responses resulting from traumatic experiences, EMDR therapy focuses directly on the memory, and is intended to change the way that the memory is stored in the brain, thus reducing and eliminating the problematic symptoms" ("EMDR Therapy").

through trauma was one thing — attempting to heal, I was discovering, was another entirely. I hadn't listened to any music in months, preferring instead to glut myself on podcasts, each grimmer than the last. Listening to podcasts allowed me to submerge myself in a decidedly unidirectional flow of information, keeping my brain occupied with disaster tourism such that I couldn't hear myself think. When I forced myself to listen to the National in order to write about them, I experienced what had previously felt like an affordance of music, rather than a hazard: I could hear my thoughts, and, more perilously, I could hear my feelings. My once-comforting, communal sense of the lyric narrators *listening back* now felt invasive and intrusive.

Allowing a therapist to probe through the morass of my brain two early mornings a week already left me scattered and flayed. I was trying desperately to "hold [myself] together," but could no longer do so "with [my] arms around the stereo" ("Apartment Story"). I had always imagined the image in that lyric to be similar to the moment in the Mountain Goats' song "Dance Music" (*The Sunset Tree*) in which the young speaker uses physical proximity with his record player's speakers as a form of protective shelter from his abusive stepfather: "I dash upstairs to take cover / Lean in close to my little record player on the floor / So this is what the volume knob's for / I listen to dance music." In the National's "Apartment Story," I similarly envisage a person huddling over a stereo, a protective, inward turn allowing them to incrementally experience a curated, controlled connection with the outside world. Turning — tuning — in toward the stereo, a device designed to project music outward along two channels, allows the listener to assemble and synthetize sound within themselves, making and remaking sound and meaning. In this image music is not only a companion, but a composite, the very substrate the listener may use to hold themselves together. Implicit in the phrasing of "hold ourselves

together" is an emergent collectivity, the shared *eros* of intimate, attentive listening physically and affectively resisting the entropy of loneliness.

Attentive listening, *attending to* music and lyrics, is an intimate, caring experience wherein attending to the sound and text is also a kind of mutual caregiving, or tending. To be a truly attentive listener, you have to be willing and able to listen with care. The etymology of the verb *care* is from the Old English *caru*, *ċearu*, which connotes care, concern, sorrow, grief, and trouble, and the Germanic *karôjan*, which translates as, "to mourn, sorrow, have trouble, trouble oneself" ("Care"). If to care is an act of emotional investment, to listen with care is to trouble oneself with the material. The combination of finally facing my own grief and trauma while COVID-19's collective grief and trauma unfolded around me left me paralyzed in a sea of cares.[111] Exhausted from trying, often unsuccessfully, to tend to and care for myself, I was unable to summon the generosity that attentive listening required of me, and that I required of my own listening. In brief, I cared too much to listen with care; trouble had found me. Attentive listening is another kind of rigorous self-study, and my nature and training are such that when I listen attentively to song lyrics, I don't only make meaning from what I hear but also reflexively make meaning from that meaning — in other words, I'm all too aware that the meaning-making process is itself meaningful. My own listening and meaning-making process had become painful, making it harder to hope for recovery. As Bridgers puts it: "Jesus Christ, I'm so blue all the time" ("Funeral," *Stranger in the Alps*").

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[111] *invisible string:* "When you go under the waves / what am I supposed to say? / I see people on the floor, / they slide into the sea. / Can't stay here anymore" (the National, "Sea of Love," *Trouble Will Find Me*).

One evening in late July 2020, I was sitting on the balcony of my East Vancouver apartment, arms folded around my bent legs, unsuccessfully tuning out the eerie, pandemic-fuelled absence of traffic sounds on nearby Main Street. I had been trying to write about the National all day and was frustrated with myself for feeling stuck and distant from the lyric texts and music that I'd always felt so enmeshed within. I was grieving the place that music used to hold in my life and grieving the past version of myself that found joy, solace, and community in listening. I was grieving the way that I used to *care* about music. Attempting to escape the oppressively quiet fugue of that midsummer high-pandemic evening, I looked down at my phone. Notifications were pouring in from every channel: Aaron Dessner, one of the core band members of the National, had a surprise new album coming out that very night — Dessner, "sad dad" incarnate, the very person whose rhythms and melodies I had been coercing myself to listen to all day, had made an album with *Taylor Swift*.

My relationship with Swift's music has been long, fervent, and largely furtive. As a young female graduate student anxious for my research about song lyrics to be taken seriously in literature departments, I have been wary of disclosing my affinity for an ostensibly unserious artist.[112] Part of my hesitancy was likely warranted. I faced pushback as it was, writing as I do

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[112] This is not to suggest that there aren't excellent reasons to critique Swift as a musician and, especially, as a massively influential, newly minted billionaire. Though Swift has campaigned in support of Democratic candidates, LGBTQIA rights, and donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to local food banks in every city she plays in, she has been slow and late in her political engagement. She acknowledges this lateness in the documentary film *Miss Americana* (2019). Several scholars have recently engaged in productive criticism of Swift's often-stumbling political efforts, particularly how

about lyricists like Samson who directly reference Derrida and Foucault.[113] I also felt in some ways better situated to write about niche, "indie"[114] artists in an authoritative manner: I have met, interviewed, and shaken hands with all the indie artists I engage with in this dissertation, and I have even shared my writing with them and received feedback. My relationship with them and their work feels embodied, human, and no matter how tenuously, reciprocal, perhaps in part because I publicly align myself with them via my published work, teaching, and conference papers.

Swift, however, increasingly the most famous artist in the world, has paradoxically always been *just mine.* Swift and I, born only a few months apart, grew up in parallel. From the time she released her first single in 2006, the summer that we were sixteen, Swift gave voice to the truest, most vulnerable parts of my developing psyche. While I repeated the lyric vocabulary of other artists' popular songs with my high school peers and later espoused the literary lyrics of "serious" writers among my university colleagues, I told very few people about my deep and abiding parasocial relationship with Swift and her music. The confessional lyrics she wrote while we were teenagers were raw, messy, and decidedly girlish — none of which made it past the

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those efforts are steeped in white feminism and adamant capitalism. See, for example, Arnold, Avdeeff, and Smialek.

[113] "Thank you for the flowers and the book by Derrida, but I must be getting back to dear Antarctica" (the Weakerthans, "Our Retired Explorer [Dines With Michel Foucault in Paris, 1961]," *Reconstruction Site*)

[114] As Swift would sarcastically say, I did indeed "hide away and find some peace of mine / with some indie record that's *much* cooler than mine" ("We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together," *Red [Taylor's Version]*).

socially acceptable filter of my internalized misogyny. Though my therapist reminds me that shame is unproductive, I am indeed ashamed to say that I wasn't confident in publicly identifying as a "Swiftie" until she had been canonized by her association with serious, male indie musicians like Dessner and Justin Vernon of Bon Iver.

Even now, when I'm asked about my research, I share the fact that I'm writing about Swift selectively, and usually with a self-deprecating grin. There's always a part of me that's waiting for my interlocuter to mock me, and sometimes they do. I both dread and relish these encounters. I relish them because I enjoy the opportunity to flex the muscles of my fandom, to enumerate Swift's accomplishments and to suggest some more nuanced ways of thinking through her artistic legacy beyond the enduringly misogynistic narratives that are often the media's focus.[115] I dread these conversations because they remind me of the massive degree to which Swift is a celebrity, someone whose private life the public feels entitled to access and evaluate, and whose ultimately mundane love life is a perennial topic of international news coverage. I feel fiercely protective of Swift, and then I feel foolish for feeling that way. Swift is, by many metrics, the most popular and successful artist in the world, but my relationship with her music and lyrics feels incredibly private and personal. Perhaps that feeling, which is shared by so many of her fans, is precisely *why* Swift is the most popular artist in the world.

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[115] And, to a lesser degree, the academy's focus, as musicologist Nate Sloan observes in his article "Taylor Swift and the Work of Songwriting": "[t]hough one of the most-discussed figures in popular culture, there exists little analysis of the musical works that remain the fulcrum of Swift's artistry and 'artist-brand.' Gender and genre bias have clouded perception of Swift's particular skills and techniques" (11).

On that late July evening in 2020, my internal and external musical identities collided and merged. Discovering that, according to Dessner, "Taylor [could] sing any National song word for word" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads") even before she reached out to him to see if he'd be interested in collaborating remotely early during the lockdowns, felt like a weirdly impossible personal gift.[116] Though my sense of fragmented selfhood, always so tied to the music I loved, was thrown into further disarray, it suddenly felt as though the fragments were scattered across the same surface instead of different planes. There was a safe place that I could go to work on gathering myself together again, and it was in the explicitly fictional realm of Swift and Dessner's new album, *folklore*. As I listened to *folklore* for the first time that night, the first music that I had electively listened to in over two years, I began to tentatively listen *to myself.* Through listening attentively to Swift — listening with care, because even in my darkest days I still cared about Swift, and I

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[116] It wasn't until after Swift's release of *folklore* in July 2020 that she revealed just how much of an "invisible string" tied these two artists together. In an interview with journalist Alex Suskind, Swift says:

> "I was at the show where [the National was] playing through *I Am Easy to Find*. What I loved about [that album] was they had female vocalists singing from female perspectives, and that triggered and fired something in me where I thought, 'I've got to play with different perspectives because that is so intriguing when you hear a female perspective come in from a band where you're used to only hearing a male perspective.' It just sparked something in me … the National is the reason why *folklore* came to be."

remain convinced that she, at least in the abstract, cares about me[117] — I began the slow process of tending to the internal wounds that I had been quietly convinced were incurable. Swift's collaboration with the National gave me the space and permission to reassemble myself, to *hold myself together* even as COVID-19 rendered all other forms of embrace and togetherness impossible.

Crucially, listening to *folklore* also facilitated my return to listening to the National. Swift's working relationship with members of the National has continued and grown in the intervening years; *folklore* was written and produced with Dessner, who further recruited two members of the National, his twin and multi-instrumentalist Bryce Dessner and drummer Bryan Devendorf, to the project. By the time Swift released *folklore*'s sister record, *evermore*, just over four months later in December 2020, all five core members of the National were credited as collaborators. The ninth track on *evermore*, "coney island (feat. the National)," is a duet with Berninger and was cowritten by Swift and the Dessner brothers. The National's 2023 album *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* also features a duet between Swift and Berninger, "The Alcott," cowritten by Aaron Dessner, Berninger, and Swift. Swift both features on and provided the name for[118] the Dessner brothers' and Justin Vernon's (a.k.a. Bon Iver) other band, Big Red Machine's, latest record, *How Long Do You Think It's Gonna Last?* (2021), cowriting and singing "Renegade" and contributing vocals on "Birch." Aaron Dessner continues to produce

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[117] I am far from the only fan for whom this reciprocal, parasocial care has provided a life-affirming sense of connection. For one example, see Garcia's "Listening to Taylor Swift in Prison," in which he describes how Swift's "music makes me feel that I'm still part of the world I left behind."

[118] See Pareles's interview with Aaron Dessner in the *New York Times.*

and cowrite with Swift and is credited on both her most recent album of new material, *The Tortured Poets Department* (2024)[119], and every *(Taylor's Version)* album re-release to date. [120] He has also appeared as a guest performer for six dates thus far on Swift's *Eras Tour*. In his *Atlantic* article "How Taylor Swift Infiltrated Dude Rock," Spencer Kornhaber praises the cross-pollinating influence the artists have had on one another. About *First Two Pages of*

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[119] This dissertation was submitted the same day that *The Tortured Poets Department* was released, 19 April 2024. A big day! While I acknowledge *TTPD's* track-list and writing credits, therefore, I do not further engage with the album in this chapter.

[120] In brief, here is the story behind (*Taylor's Version*) re-recording project. Swift signed a six-album record deal with Big Machine Records (not to be confused with Dessner and Vernon's band Big Red Machine) in 2005, when she was fifteen years old. In 2018, when her contract was complete, Big Machine offered her the chance to buy back the rights to her own master recordings, but only on the condition that she sign another multi-album deal. Swift refused, and instead signed with Republic Records, which guaranteed her full ownership over all of her subsequent music. In 2019, Big Machine Records was sold to Ithaca Holdings, a venture capital firm owned in part by music manager Scooter Braun, a man who Swift considered to be an "incessant, manipulative bully" (Swift via Instagram). In an open letter posted to her social media accounts, Swift called the details of this sale her "worst case scenario." Since 2019, Swift has been re-recording and re-releasing her first six albums, to massive critical acclaim and commercial success, and has been advocating for changes in the music industry's predatory practice of offering exploitative record contracts, especially to artists who are minors. *Rolling Stone* ranked Braun's purchase of Swift's masters as number twenty-one on their list of "The 50 Worst Decisions in Music History," and in 2021 Braun expressed his "regret" (Green). For more information, see also Brodesser-Akner.

Frankenstein, Kornhaber writes, "Swift's influence feels pervasive … she seems to have taught them something about the mode of candid self-expression that she has mastered. In so doing, the National and Taylor Swift have become one of the unlikeliest and most productive synergies in contemporary music."

In listening for Swift's voice on the National's records, I returned to the National with a friend — a sonic companion with whom to wade back into the affective deep end. It has been over three years since I first listened to *folklore*, and in that time I have listened to two new Swift albums*, evermore* and *Midnights*, and four *(Taylor's Version)* album re-recordings (*Red, Fearless, Speak Now,* and *1989*). I have also listened to two new albums by the National, *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* and *Laugh Track* (both 2023). When the National surprise dropped *Laugh Track,* their second album of the year, part way through writing this chapter, listening attentively to it didn't feel like a chore, but a privilege. Though I first listened to Swift's song "the 1," the opening song on *folklore*, in complete isolation and near-complete despair, three years later, almost to the day, I listened to it live during the Eras Tour at the Lumen Field stadium in Seattle among 73,000 other fans, in ebullient community and crying genuine tears of joy. That night, local seismologists recorded the equivalent of a 2.3 magnitude earthquake near the stadium while we all danced to "Shake it Off"[121] — shaking off the ghostly, clutching hands of trauma and celebrating our return from musical "exile" (featuring Bon Iver, *folklore*). As I return to writing following an extended medical leave, therefore, several years into this pandemic and nearly as long into my own recovery, it no longer feels right to write this final chapter solely

[121] "When Taylor Swift performed 'Shake It Off' in Seattle, Swifties literally shook the Earth, seismologists say" (CBC News).

about the National. Instead, following the artists' lead of collaboration and cross-pollination, I find myself returning to the artist whose songs have been the surreptitious soundtrack to every major event in my life. In this chapter, I return to both the National and Swift, and so, to myself.

In writing explicitly about my own listening, this work operates as its own form of therapeutic intervention — not just as a confessional, but also as a kind of *making*, making a record of my own listening and how that listening enabled me to make it. In this chapter, I consider selfhood — its loss, the search for it, its situatedness, its abjection — and the ways in which the self *sounds itself* in the song lyrics of Swift and the National. In particular, I attend to how my own self was re-made during the recuperative, careful process of listening to Berninger and Swift give voice to their cast of semi-fictional speakers.

I follow the sequence of my own listening: in Part One, I close read several selections from the National's pre- and mid-pandemic catalogue that focus on motifs of finding. In these songs, I listen to Berninger's and Besser's narrators search for a way out of their personal echo chambers — to be heard by not only another person, but also to gain enough distance from themselves to hear, and thereby find, themselves — and I offer myself*,* as an attentive listener, as an escape hatch. In Part Two, I turn to Swift's pandemic-era albums, *folklore*, *evermore*, and *Midnights*, and ongoing *(Taylor's Version)* album re-recording project, and I think about how sonic self-narration is contingent upon attentive listening. In tracing my listening to Swift's listening, especially in the recuperative context of her *(Taylor's Version)* project, I begin to find a way to hopefully, carefully, attentively, and recuperatively listen to myself.

This chapter both records how I listen attentively to these albums, and provides a record in the sense that it writes back to the songs that I'm listening to. It also records how I listen back to my own listening. Rather than discard the work I was doing on the National before taking

medical leave, I find myself in conversation with the records of a previous version of myself, someone who listened differently than I do today, and so was able to hear tones that are no longer audible to me, but who also missed tenors and timbres that now sound unmistakeable. In writing and listening back to myself — sounding and sounding out — I am further rehabilitating and reassembling the voice that I once feared lost. Or, as Swift would put it, "I'd like to be my old self again, but I'm still trying to find it" ("All Too Well [10 Minute Version] [Taylor's Version] [From the Vault]," *Red [Taylor's Version]*). This chapter records my return to listening to music and to myself, as well as how I found this music and let it find me.

Part One: "I Am Easy to Find":[122] Searching for Connection With the National

The National is a mostly band of brothers: twins Bryce and Aaron Dessner are the band's primary composers, arrangers, and multi-instrumentalists, and brothers Bryan and Scott Devendorf make up the rhythm section. All of the members are originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, though the group didn't form until they were all living in Brooklyn, New York, in 1999. The band's experimental orchestral-rock music, full of tightly interlacing polyrhythms and intricately layered instrumental melodies, is juxtaposed against lyricist and singer Matt Berninger's loose, swaggering baritone. Often compared to Leonard Cohen and Nick Cave, Berninger's vocal tracks weave over and under the instrumentals less like a tapestry and more like a drunken man weaving through a crowd at a concert. Berninger's live performances often render this simile literal: Berninger anxiously paces, dragging his microphone's almost comically long cable behind him while he refills his glass from the bottle of wine he habitually brings on stage, until

[122] the National, "I Am Easy to Find," *I Am Easy to Find.*

he jumps down from the stage and enters the crowd. Berninger's wandering vocals and body place him at a sonic and physical distance from the rest of the band; he is the only member without his brother on stage, his brooding, introspective performance affect reinforcing his lyric personae's performative aloofness.

While on stage, Berninger keeps his eyes closed for the majority of the show. In a recent interview, he explained that "[m]aking eye contact with people is always dangerous for me, especially in the middle of a song. My brain disconnects and misfires" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads"). Even as he opens his eyes and enters the crowd, Berninger is a man apart, "so tall I take over the street" ("All the Wine," *Alligator*). [123] Stumbling and pushing through, he sings and shouts with and at audience members, his microphone's cable snaking behind him, held aloft by members of the crowd and crew alike. Berninger clutches his microphone like a life preserver, a loose tether he uses to retrace his steps to the stage like an astronaut on a spacewalk, his microphone cable the only line preventing him from being lost to the vacuum of space. Meanwhile, the cable carries his voice back through the crowd, up onto the stage, through the monitors, and then back to the crowd's ears. It's nearly instantaneous, but — as someone who has crushed into the middle of the crowd at a National show on many occasions — if Berninger gets close enough, you can hear the slight delay between his raw voice, shouting to you in person, and his amplified voice, shouting to everyone from the monitors. The uncanny doubling of Berninger's voice, even as he's standing so close that members of the audience can and do touch him, reinforces the distance between his lyric personae, trying desperately to be understood, and us, trying

[123] *invisible string:* "I'm a monster on the hill / too big to hang out, slowly lurching toward your favorite city" (Swift, "Anti-Hero," *Midnights*).

desperately to understand. Whether on stage or in the crowd, Berninger looks and sounds like a "Space Invader" (*Laugh Track*), his body, voice, and personae alien and unplaceable even as they are at the centre of everyone's attention.

Since "Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks" closed their 2010 album *High Violet*, the National has ended the majority of their live shows with an acoustic rendition of the song. Every member of the band unplugs their instruments and forms a line downstage, and the Dessner twins each play acoustic guitars while Berninger leads the crowd and remaining band members through a sing-along. This soft, choral moment usually follows a particularly raucous song in the encore set, during which Berninger is deep within the crowd repeatedly screaming lines like, "I'm Mr. November, I won't fuck us over!" ("Mr. November," *Alligator*) or, "It's a terrible love and I'm walking with spiders" ("Terrible Love," *High Violet*). The contrast between the amplified and acoustic sounds of the band are stark, but the decibel level of the room remains more or less consistent as the crowd fills in the sonic space. During "Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks," the crowd settles from their frenzy into an intimate, breathless collectivity, gently swaying together while singing the single line of the chorus again and again: "All the very best of us string ourselves up for love." In this line, each member of the crowd sings and witnesses a common confession; all of us, even the "very best of us," will make fools of ourselves for love. In the final moments of the show, Berninger becomes just one singer of thousands, listening to our voices blend and echo in space. It's the only song that he regularly sings on stage with his eyes open.

Just as Berninger spends the majority of the concerts performing at a remove from the rest of the band members, the National's songs are frequently written at a distance. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic made this a more common practice, the National's band members

habitually composed and even recorded songs remotely from one another.[124] The National's songwriting practice echoes their lyrics' preoccupation with the tensions between distance and proximity, belonging and abjection, and quotidian tragedy. In music writer Amanda Petrusich's longform profile of the National for *The New Yorker*, she traces the band's twenty-five-year journey from their early days living close together in Brooklyn to the present, when all five members of the band live in different cities (or, in Bryce Dessner's case, on a different continent). Bryce Dessner describes the band's current composition of members as "scattered to the wind" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads"). Despite the infrequency with which all five core band members were in the same room (with the exception of when they were touring together), however, prior to the pandemic, the group maintained cohesion even through various members' side projects.

In the spring and summer of 2020, however, while Aaron Dessner was writing and recording *folklore* with Swift, Berninger "froze." For nearly a year, Berninger describes a writer's block so profound that he could neither write nor sing: "[m]y voice didn't work … [it] was like I had no air … [I was] close to nonverbal" (Petrusich, "Sad Dads"). It wasn't until the National was contractually obliged to resume touring in the summer of 2021 — when Berninger closed his eyes and sang to the crowds, and heard them singing back to him[125] — that Berninger began to find his way back to himself. Though Berninger identifies this period as the most

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[124] See Baccigaluppi's interview with the band for more information about this practice.

[125] *invisible string:* ""I have heard them singing each to each, and who's to say that they won't sing to me?" (Samson, "Alpha Adept," *Winter Wheat*).

extreme artistic disorientation that he has ever experienced, the narrator of the National's song "Graceless" from their 2013 album *Trouble Will Find Me* offers a prophetic glimpse at Berninger's journey:

> I am invisible and weightless … Just come and find me.
> God loves everybody, don't remind me.
> I took the medicine and I went missing.
> Just let me hear your voice. Just let me listen.

Though the narrator of "Graceless" has lost themselves in despair, they are able to identify a remedy: they beg the auditor, "Just let me hear your voice. Just let me listen." In a slightly eerie coincidence, Berninger and I, unbeknownst to one another, lost our voices. It wasn't until he was able to listen to a crowd singing back to him, and, for my part, until I was back *in attendance* in that crowd, singing along, that we both began to return to ourselves.

"Sorrow Found Me:"[126] The Trouble with Being "Easy to Find"[127]

For me, listening attentively to the National means mapping the routes by which personae in their lyrics search for, and occasionally find, connection. In these songs, connection holds a similar position to the weak hope I conceptualized in Chapter One, as both exhibit an unlikely optimism rooted in a tenacious search to hear and be heard. Though Berninger is the band's primary lyricist, Carin Besser, a writer and former fiction editor at *The New Yorker* and Berninger's wife, has collaborated on many of the National's lyrics since their 2007 album

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[126] the National, "Sorrow," *High Violet.*

[127] the National, "I Am Easy to Find," *I Am Easy to Find.*

Boxer. That the National's lonely, often lovelorn lyrics originate from writers in a longtime life and artistic partnership only underscores many of their narrators' worldview that loneliness is intrinsic rather than relational. It is lonely to be alone, but it is also lonely — sometimes more so — to be in love. It is both humiliating and hilarious to be alive ("another un-innocent, elegant fall / Into the un-magnificent lives of adults" ["Mistaken for Strangers," *Boxer*]), and also preciously, fleetingly, glorious ("God loves everybody, don't remind me" ["Graceless," *Trouble Will Find Me*]).

Berninger's and Besser's narrators sound loss and absence by singing into the void and stubbornly hoping to hear a voice echoing back,[128] searching for connection via echolocation.[129] Personae in Berninger's and Besser's song lyrics are listening to and for themselves; much like Berninger has to listen to his own voice through stage monitors in order to situate himself within the music, the only way to be able to sing on key is if you can hear yourself. The farther Berninger wanders from the stage, the less he can hear himself (he often appears to keep time by reading the lips of the crowd around him), and so he hears himself only through the ears and mouths of how others hear him. As they sing their songs, Berninger's and Besser's personae likewise perform an otographical ontology — a proprioceptive, oral/aural categorization —

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[128] I hear the desire for connection through echolocation in many places throughout the National's songs, such as here in "Deep End (Paul's in Pieces)" (*Laugh Track*): "Ringing in my ears sounds like singing / it's the only thing I hear / I'm drowning out / Inside the sound … I'm always trying to tune you out, / But I'm gonna let you in tonight / when the sound of your voice comes through … It's the only thing I hear / I just cling to it."

[129] As a reminder, I conceive of echolocation as a simultaneous voicing and listening in order to find and be found.

sounding and spatializing their listening practices to find and to be found; to listen and be listened to.

The fundamental relationship between self and other as expressed by many of Berninger's and Besser's narrators is that they are "Easy to Find" (*I Am Easy to Find*), while everyone else is "Hard to Find" (*Trouble Will Find Me*). The songwriters' diction broods on the verb *to find*, a searching action that starts from a place of loss and/or lack but resolves in location.[130] The verb *to find* is also pertinent in the interpretive sense, especially as related to self-interpretation; for example in phrases like, 'I find myself at odds with,' 'I find myself in the position of,' or 'I find myself at a loss for words.' To "find yourself" is therefore also to *understand*[131] yourself, at least momentarily, so these narrators' desire to "find" their auditors can be read as attempts to understand them. In this way, finding can also be linked to attentive listening, since both are interpretive processes during which we search for and *make* meaning from the data we assemble. When Berninger's and Besser's narrators say that they are "Easy to Find," they are self-deprecatingly alleging that they are easy to read, uncomplicated, and, perhaps, not all that interesting ("You could drive a car through my head in five minutes / from

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[130] Swift appears to have noticed the same pattern; when writing "coney island (feat. the National)" (*evermore*), a duet she intended to sing with Berninger, the opening lines of the song are: "Break my soul in two / Looking for you but you're right here."

[131] Hearing and understanding are intimately linked in the phenomenological sense. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* (qtd. in lrd 28), he argues that, "to understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to *hear what it says (l'entendre)*. The meaning is…the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given within the words for those who have ears to hear" (155).

one side of it to the other" ["Slow Show," *Boxer*]). These narrators' perceived lack of intellectual and emotional depth is especially pointed in comparison to their "Brainy"[132] counterparts, who remain "Hard to Find." The central fear, for many of these characters, is that their innermost, ugliest mundanities might be clearly legible to everyone around them while they remain incapable of understanding the inner lives of the people that they love.[133] Even as they fear

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[132] In "Brainy," track three on *Boxer*, the narrator paints an unflattering self-portrait of their own intelligence as compared to their auditor:

> "You keep changing your fancy, fancy mind every time I decide to let go.
> I was up all night again, boning up and reading the American dictionary,
> You'll never believe me what I found. Think I better follow you around."

[133] In "Tropic Morning News," the third track on *The First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, the speaker mourns the growing intellectual and emotional distance he feels between himself and his lover:

> Oh, where's the brain we shared?
> Something somehow has you rapidly improving
> Oh, what happened to the wavelength we were on?
> Oh, where's the gravity gone?...
> You found the slush in my sentiment, you made it sound so intelligent.
> I'll be over here lying near the ocean, making ocean sounds.
> Let me know if you can come over and work the controls for a while.

In this song, the narrator is bereft not only of their auditor's company, but also of their mutual ability to find meaning —to *make* meaning — from each other's words. Left to their own devices, the speaker is no longer able to parse their own "slush" of sentiment, and their voice is drowned amongst "ocean sounds."

exposure, however, they also long to find and be found, to listen and be listened to, to understand and be understood.

Though it is possible to find someone or something by chance, *to find* more commonly connotes a deliberate search or hunt in the hopes of discovery — or, just as often, and of more recent personal interest, of recovery. When I was first writing this chapter, I couldn't hear the chance for recovery in these songs and was particularly averse to the possibility that you could search, or listen, to recover yourself. Once again, I read my own words from years ago as if they are written by an alien, hearing the same sounds with an entirely different listening apparatus:

> Considering Berninger's and Besser's narrators' dual focus on troubled selfhood and *finding*, it comes as a welcome surprise that they steer clear of twee existentialist narratives related to *finding yourself.* It is less that these characters have a confident sense of who they are and more that they have a clear way of measuring what they lack. Ruminating about their attempts to find what they have either lost or never had — love, partnership, companionship, youth, and belonging — Berninger's and Besser's narrators locate themselves primarily in relation to absence. These characters have stayed stuck in place while everyone around them moves on, getting physically and metaphorically farther and farther away from them: "I'm not going anywhere / Who do I think I'm kidding? / I'm still standing in the same place / Where you left me standing" ("Easy to Find," *Easy to Find*).
>
> It is therefore doubly galling that the only entities to explicitly *find* any of these characters are the personified Sorrow ("Sorrow found me when I was young" ["Sorrow," *High Violet*) and Trouble ("If I stay here, trouble will find me" ["Sea of Love," *Trouble Will Find Me*]). Though the distressing concepts of sorrow and trouble have no issue

finding Berninger's and Besser's speakers, love, contentment, peace, and community rarely appear to be in pursuit. Instead, narrators in the National's songs attempt, and usually fail, to find these elusive concepts. Their songs not only describe but *enact* this frustrated search, the speakers sending their songs echoing out into the vast emptiness they perceive around them in the fragile hope that someone will hear them, and then come and *find them*.

The possibility that these speakers might be able to listen for and thereby find themselves in a way that's not exactly "twee existentialist" but something more grounded wasn't on my sonar in 2019. I heard the search, but I couldn't hear the recovery. Now, as I listen to "Sorrow," I hear what Berninger means when he suggests that the song is about "a person's love affair with his own sadness" (Hyden). Now, when I think about the speaker sending their songs echoing out into space, I imagine, in fact *experience*, them being heard by me, the attentive listener. Though the speaker might not be able to picture me, their words reach and find me just as I reach out to hold them. Likewise, I offer this record of my listening to you, the reader, to hold and to hear, to listen and listen back.

"Sorrow," the second track on *High Violet*, remains a central case study for me when thinking through the ways Berninger's and Besser's lyrics sound out their search for connection with unlikely, or weak, places, people, or concepts. There is a troubled reciprocity in the narrator's relationship with "Sorrow," an intoxicating "love affair" (Hyden) that is by turns sweet and poisonous, what *Pitchfork* critic Laura Snapes has called a "luxurious purgatory." When the narrator was young, Sorrow personified found and claimed them for its own. There is a possessiveness implied in the idea of finding, when discovery immediately becomes proprietary: *finders keepers*. When Sorrow finds the narrator, it metastasizes into every part of their life:

Sorrow found me when I was young.

Sorrow waited, sorrow won.

Sorrow, they put me on the pill.

It's in my honey, it's in my milk …

Sorrow's my body on the waves.

Sorrow's a girl inside my cake.

I live in a city sorrow built.

Rather than an attractive woman hiding within a pop-out cake, even the metaphorical icing-covered cardboard edifices in the narrator's life contain Sorrow. Sorrow buffets the speaker's body while they struggle to stay afloat, always threatening to pull them under "waves" of depression. Sorrow inescapably follows the narrator, repeatedly proving that it can find them anywhere.

There is, however, another way to read Sorrow's lingering presence in the narrator's life. Though Sorrow has been a foil to the narrator's happiness, it has also been a constant companion. In the line "Sorrow, they put me on the pill," I now hear the narrator apologizing to Sorrow for trying to banish it and shifting the blame away from themselves for the decision to take anti-depressant medication. Several years later, the narrator of the National's song "Quiet Light" (*I Am Easy to Find*) echoes the speaker's sentiment in "Sorrow," mourning the loss not of a loved one, but of Sorrow, or "heartache" itself: "I'm learning to live without the heartache it gives me, nothing I wouldn't do for another few minutes." It is in their relationships with Sorrow and heartache that these narrators constitute themselves.

In the line, "It's in my honey, it's in my milk," I once imagined Sorrow spoiling the narrator's proverbial milk and honey:

> Religion and spirituality are often portrayed as quests or journeys in order to find God. Colloquially, Christians refer to “finding Jesus,” which likely originates in Biblical wayfinding parables such as “seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7). In the Old Testament, God promises his chosen people, the Israelites, that they will be delivered from slavery and find “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8) after wandering the desert for forty years. The Biblical motif of milk and honey connotes hope for abundance and prosperity: once the Israelites find their way to their new homeland, God’s covenant will ensure that the land provides for them.
>
> In “Sorrow,” however, the narrator already lives in a land of plentiful “honey” and “milk” — but instead of representing an exultant homecoming at the end of a long journey, the abundance that the speaker has acquired is laced with Sorrow. The land of plenty that the speaker lives in belongs to Sorrow, and the narrator “live[s] in a city Sorrow built.” Though Sorrow has easily found the narrator, it seems that the narrator is to unable find *God* — and so Sorrow replaces the Divine, claiming the narrator for its own. Sorrow, in this metaphor, becomes both endemic and systemic, a pervasive and insidious force that can be read as the miserable entrapment inherent in late-stage capitalism. Sorrow possesses the narrator because it knows where to find every vulnerable spot in their psyche; it has both burrowed into their innermost algorithmic anxieties and engorged itself until it permeates the civic and political structures under which the narrator lives.

In case it isn’t obvious from the embittered tone, at the time of writing the above I, too, felt that I had been found and conquered by Sorrow. I was not yet able to imagine Sorrow as a lifelong companion, one that I could cohabitate with more or less peacefully if only I stopped

resenting and rejecting its presence. It is with new ears that I now listen to “Sorrow,” especially the speaker’s words in the chorus:

> Don’t leave my hyper heart alone on the water.
>
> Cover me in rag and bone sympathy.
>
> Cause I don’t wanna get over you.
>
> I don’t wanna get over you.

I once imagined the unnamed “you” a lost lover. Part of this interpretation likely stemmed from a nearly decade-long misprision on my part; I had always heard, “Don’t leave my half-a-heart alone,” rather than, “Don’t leave my hyper heart alone.” In my initial listening, the speaker was begging not to be left bereft with only half of their broken heart, drowning in the waves of Sorrow. As I listen now, however, it seems to me that the speaker directly addresses Sorrow in these lines. Though Sorrow has infiltrated and dampened many parts of the speaker’s life, they don’t want to metaphorically break up, nor do they want to “get over” the relationship. The speaker’s “hyper heart” beats too fast, and Sorrow is a tempering force. The speaker longs for sympathy, and, though their sympathy is poor and abject (“rag and bone”), Sorrow soothes. Sorrow, though perhaps not the cheeriest companion, always listens. It is within the reciprocal listening engagement between the speaker and Sorrow that they are able to locate themselves; and it is the same engagement between my listening and “Sorrow,” the song, that I am able to find comfort in listening to *A Lot of Sorrow*.

"I would always be light years away from you":[134] Distance and Proximity

When you find a romantic partner, especially when you find "the one," part of the reward is that, theoretically, you get to keep them. In the National's song "Lucky You" (*Sad Songs for Dirty Lovers*), for example, the narrator dolefully reminds their partner, "You could've made a safer bet, / but what you break is what you get … You own me. / There's nothing you can do. / You own me. / Lucky you." Many of Berninger's and Besser's narrators, however, are unable to find their partners — nor, therefore, to understand them — and feel great anxiety about their ability to keep them. In "Coat on a Hook," for example, track nine on the National's most recent album, *Laugh Track*, the narrator complains, "I ask the same questions to everyone I see. / What am I missing? Where have you been?" Several characters shakily conclude that the reason they are unlucky in long-term love is that they are unable to find a way to get close to their partners: there is a distance between them that feels like an impossible chasm not because of fundamental incompatibility, but because of unnavigable, unidirectional remoteness. Though these characters strain to listen to and thereby understand their partners (*intending* towards them in both sense of the word[135]), they never quite manage to bridge the distance.

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[134] "Light Years," *I Am Easy to Find*.

[135] "To strain or direct" the ear, "[t]o give auditory attention; to give ear, listen, hearken" (Intend, *V*). In *Phenomenology*, Jean-François Lyotard describes the intending or "perceiving subject" (54) as the "I" that is constituted in its inclination toward others or toward things. In other words, you are what you intend towards. In my reading, which links intending with attentive listening, you are what you listen to, or perhaps, you are how you listen to what you listen to.

In “Light Years,” the final track on the National’s 2019 album *I Am Easy to Find,* the narrator configures the erosion of their relationship as the opening of a cosmic distance between themselves and their partner. Though the narrator “Was always ten feet behind [their partner] from the start,” it is not until the relationship shows its strain over time that the speaker realizes that the figurative distance of ten feet may as well be the distance between galaxies: “I saw how hard it’d be to reach you / And I would always be light years, light years away from you.” “Light Years” is scaffolded around a central motif of light and dark, wherein light feels cold and distant and darkness feels warm and close. Berninger’s and Besser’s lyrics often lean into chiaroscuro; for example in the titles of the songs “Quiet Light” and “Dust Swirls in Strange Light” from *I Am Easy to Find*, and “The System Only Dreams in Total Darkness” and “Dark Side of the Gym” from *Sleep Well Beast* (2017). In “Demons,” the lead single from *Trouble Will Find Me*, the narrator wryly plays on another usage of the phrase “light up”: “When I walk into a room, I do not light it up. / Fuck. / So I stay down with my demons.”

“Light Years” opens with reference to light through a bittersweet image reminiscent of the end of a holiday, in which the speaker’s partner waits for them “outside in the sun / Laying down to soak it all in before we had to run.” Right away, the speaker and their partner are separated by space and light, one of them “outside in the sun,” and the other presumably still indoors. It’s not until they are both in the same space, however, that the speaker realizes that their partner has already metaphorically moved on from relationship: “Didn’t realize you were gone until we were in the car.” In that moment, though the two characters have come back into close physical proximity in the same vehicle, the speaker finally recognizes the uncrossable chasm that has been open between them “from the start”: the speaker is separated by “light years” from their partner, no longer able to “reach” them because they are already “gone.” The

speaker is too late to recoup closeness, and perhaps most tragically, the speaker was always too late: “always ten feet behind … from the start.”

In the second verse, the couple has physically separated, and the speaker sings to the disembodied memory of their partner. Just as star systems can appear to us as proximate but are in fact unfathomable distances apart,[136] the speaker in “Light Years” recognizes that their former partner could be anywhere, even “right next” to them, and they would still “never” find them:

> I thought I saw your mother last weekend, in the park.
>
> It could’ve been anybody, it was after dark.
>
> Everyone was lighting up in the shadows alone,
>
> You could’ve been right there next to me, and I’d have never known.

Like an after-image from a flash of light, the speaker sees traces and remnants of their lost love everywhere they go. In the darkness, “everyone” is “alone,” separated from each other not only by the anonymity of darkness, but also by the isolating, flickering spotlights of lighters momentarily casting a glow onto the smokers’ faces as they “light up.”

In “Light Years,” the darkness’s ability to disguise proximity feels both tragically poignant, in that the speaker will “never know” if they could have been close to their former partner, and rich with the potential, or the weak hope, that the speaker might always be closer to their lover than they think. Similarly, there are two ways to read the first lines of the chorus: “Oh the glory of it all was lost on me, / ’til I saw how hard it’d be to reach you.” The first is the clichéd maxim that you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone. The second, more intriguing

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[136] *invisible string*: “Is there a special telescope, a distant star to follow you everywhere you are?” (Fellows, “Ghost Particle,” *Stuff We All Get*).

possibility, is that the speaker finds a kind of glory in the eternal distance between themselves and not only their partner, but everyone else. In Biblical references, *glory* usually refers to the unbearably beautiful sight of a physical manifestation of God, often represented by light:[137] the glory of the first light of dawn, or an "effulgence of light such as is associated with conceptions of heaven" ("Glory"). If we are always already "Light Years" away from one another, even if we're unwittingly standing right next to someone in the dark, then what a sublime miracle — *oh, the glory of it all* — that we nonetheless spend our lives trying to reach, find, hold, and listen to one another.

In the bridge of "Quiet Light," the second track on *I Am Easy to Find*, the speaker describes the agonies and ecstasies of imagining a former lover waking up to the same quiet light of dawn in another part of the same city, what I understand as a kind of "morning glory." In this song, the speaker not only imagines seeing their lover, but also hearing them both everywhere and nowhere at once:

> I can't help it. It's you that I think I hear in the quiet light.
>
> Am I crazy? You're nowhere near me, guess I don't know what I'm saying.
>
> Just call me, I'll come to where you are alone in the quiet light.
>
> I'm always thinking you're behind me, and
>
> I turn around and you're always there.

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[137] *invisible string*: "We hold our hands up to the light" (Fellows, "Reversed Arrow," *Femmes de chez nous*); "Give us patience. Give us grace. Give us peace. Give us space. Give us kindness. Give us light" ("S.W.A.G." *Stuff We All Get*).

The speaker hopes to find the auditor via echolocation, learning to sound and listen simultaneously for echoes in the quiet while "the sky turns from black to grey." The reciprocal soft haunting of the speaker and their former lover is both comforting and disorienting; like an echo or an afterimage, the speaker "always" thinks their former lover is right behind them, and, in a way, they always are.[138] Three tracks later, the two speakers in the song "The Pull of You," a duet between Berninger and Irish singer Lisa Hannigan, express a similar sense of inevitable connection: "What was it you always said? We're connected by a thread. / If we ever get far apart, I'll still feel the pull of you."[139] While there is comfort in the bond between them, it is also fragile; "a thread" is easily snapped when pulled taut over a distance. As the speaker in the following track, "Hey Rosey," says, "There's never really any safety in it. / Please do it again." Voiced by Gail Ann Dorsey, a long-time collaborator of David Bowie, the speaker in "Hey Rosey" succinctly expresses the central contradiction of attachment: though connection, love, and community are how we build a sense of security, attachment is never truly safe. "All the very best of us" do indeed "string ourselves up for love" ("Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks").

I Am Easy to Find marks a shift in the National's composition in all senses of the word.[140] Though Berninger's voice has historically been backed up by accompanying male vocalists, on

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[138] *invisible string*: "Ghost particle, here you are or here you were" (Fellows, "Ghost Particle," *Stuff We All Get*).

[139] *invisible string*: "Isn't just so pretty to think / all along there was some / invisible string tying you to me?" (Swift, "invisible string," *folklore*).

[140] The album is the band's first to be released concomitantly with a twenty-six-minute film of the same name directed by Mike Mills (who also co-wrote and produced several songs on the record) and

this album, nearly every track is a duet between Berninger and a female vocalist. In some songs, Berninger's voice features very little or not at all; as explained in the album's press release, the "frontman and natural focal point was deliberately and dramatically sidestaged [sic] in favor of a variety of female voices, nearly all of whom have long been in the group's orbit" (*4AD*). The gender-coded voices on this album make it easier for the listener to distinguish their difference, and to imagine that, even as we hear them both, they cannot hear each other.

The title track, "I Am Easy to Find" (track seven), for example, is a duet between Berninger and Kate Stables, lead singer for UK-based alternative rock band This is the Kit and long-time collaborator and friend of the National band members. Every lyric is sung in unison, save for one line at the beginning of the second chorus and the choral "oohs" that close the song. The track opens with a line that identifies a "we" ("How long have we been here?") but immediately diverges into two separate first-person accounts ("Am I ever coming down?"). Though the narrators are singing the same words at the same time, there is no sense that they can hear each other; in fact, their central *agon* seems to be that they each feel abandoned, marooned in their solitude. Both characters sing partially to themselves and partially to an absent auditor, forlornly longing for their return:

> I'm not going anywhere, who do I think I'm kidding?
>
> I'm still standing in the same place where you left me standing
>
> ……………
>
> If you ever come around this way again, you'll see me

---

starring Alicia Vikander. Mills claims that the "movie was composed like a piece of music; the music was assembled like a film, by a film director" (*4AD).*

Standing in the sunlight in the middle of the street.

In these lines, the motif of standing,[141] a temporary, arrested posture, contrasts against the characters' shared conviction that they will be stuck *standing still* permanently while their former lover moves farther and farther away from them — such as here, in "Dreaming" (*Laugh Track*): "You're always right where you leave yourself."[142] Both characters are singing the same words and therefore appear to share the sentiment that they are "easy to find," if only their former lover would choose to come back to them. By singing the same words at the same time, however, they are also singing over one another, so caught up in sending that they are unable to receive. Since the characters are unable to hear one another, they are also unable to understand one another, and are therefore caught in stasis.

I hear the dynamic between the two characters in "I Am Easy to Find" as the National's version of a tale of star-crossed lovers; rather than a grand narrative of cosmic forces intervening in a destined love story, Berninger's and Besser's speakers are doomed to the more quotidian tragedy of miscommunication. Instead of ending with the characters' dramatic deaths, the song closes with the speakers repeating a weakly hopeful promise to one another: "There's a million little battles that I'm never gonna win anyway. / I'm still waiting for you every night with ticker-

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[141] *invisible string*: "I can see you standing, honey, with his arms around your body, / Laughing but the joke's not funny at all. / And it took you five whole minutes / To pack us up and leave me with it / Holding all this love out here in the hall" (Swift feat. Bon Iver, "exile," *folklore*).

[142] *invisible string*: Swift also sings about this stasis in "right where you left me" (*folklore*). "I'm still at the restaurant / Still sitting in a corner I haunt … I sat and stared / Right where you left me … / You left me no choice but to stay here forever."

tape." In other words, not only is each character waiting for the other to return, but they plan to greet them with a ticker-tape parade: a hero's welcome.[143] That the material they plan to use for confetti is ticker tape (strips of paper recycled from another use) suggests that they are each collecting, shredding, and stockpiling the scraps of everyday life, waiting "every night" for the chance to release it in celebration.[144] Though they can't find each other, they remain stubbornly, persistently hopeful that, as long as they follow the standard advice to stay in the same spot where they last saw the person they've lost, there's still the chance — the slim, weak hope — of being found.

The two characters in the song "The Alcott" (track seven, *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*) are in a similar bind to those in "I Am Easy to Find." "The Alcott" is written and performed in collaboration with Swift, and, though members of the National featured throughout *folklore* and *evermore*, this is Swift's first appearance on a National track.[145] "The Alcott" is a duet between a couple attempting to articulate their separation who meet up at a hotel bar and continue to entirely misunderstand one another. Swift's character haunts the back corner of a bar called the Alcott, writing in her "golden notebook" about "someone," Berninger's character

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[143] *invisible string*: "I greet you with a battle hero's welcome" (Swift, "tolerate it," *evermore*).

[144] *invisible string*: Samson's poem "Liminal Highway": "you wish / you were a three hole punch / sleek shiny black and a / mysteriously pleasant weight / assisting children with their / school presentations while / slowly stockpiling confetti / for no particular occasion / just some average day / suddenly it is needed."

[145] Swift's duet with Berninger on her album *evermore*, "coney island (feat. the National)," similarly recounts two characters' search for a lost love: "Break my soul in two / Looking for you but you're right here … / I'm sitting on a bench in Coney Island wondering where did my baby go?"

morosely sings, "that used to be me." This song is unusual in the National's catalogue in that Berninger's character knows exactly where to physically find Swift's character, and both longs for and dreads the encounter: "I get myself twisted in threads / to meet you at The Alcott. / I'd go to the corner in the back / where you'd always be, / and there you are sitting, as usual." It soon becomes clear, however, that since neither character is willing or able to listen to one another, they risk missing — losing[146] — each other entirely. Speaking at cross purposes, the narrators sing the first chorus together: "The last thing you wanted / is the first thing I do. / I tell you my problems, / you tell me the truth." In these lines, the characters describe one of the more galling features of a crumbling long-term relationship; the ability to incisively hurt each other with "the truth" because both people know exactly how to push one another's buttons.

A hotel bar is often a liminal setting for transitory encounters, and in "The Alcott," the bar becomes a metaphor for the porous threshold between the two characters. By the second verse, the narrators are singing out of sync with each other, overlapping lines in a conversation in which it's clear that neither of them is attentively listening to the other, but are trying instead only to be heard. Some of the lines read like dramatic monologues or asides to the audience, in which the speaker wonders for a moment if, contrary to what they're saying out loud to their interlocuter, everything might be their fault. In the second chorus, Berninger's and Swift's characters trade lines, overlapping parts of each other's delivery:

Berninger: You tell me your problems

Swift: (*Have I become one of your problems?*)

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[146] *invisible string:* "I can't find a pulse, my heart won't start anymore. / You're losing me" (Swift, "You're Losing Me [From the Vault]" *Midnights*).

……………

Berninger: It's the last thing you wanted

Swift: (*Everything that's mine is a landmine*)

Berninger: It's the first thing I do

Swift: (*Did my love aid and abet you?*)

"The Alcott" voices some of the ways that intimate relationships can blur the line between interiority and exteriority, especially near the end of a relationship, when the parties involved are attempting to redraw and re-establish these boundaries. At the end of a long-term relationship, both members of a couple have to ask themselves some complicated questions; what's mine is no longer yours, but which parts of myself were originally mine? How do I recoup the outline of myself? As Swift's character sings, with a mixture of pathos and defiance, "Give me some tips to forget you." For the characters in this song, the process of disentangling is messy, fraught, and protracted, and both of them linger with doubts about whether separating is actually what they want. Each of the song's choruses conclude with both characters warily disclosing what might once have been a cause for joy: "I tell you that I think I'm falling / back in love with you." Rather than a cause for celebration, however, their declarations of potentially renewed love feel cautious and, to borrow a word from Swift, treacherous[147] in their inevitability. Both characters worry that they will "ruin it all over" for each other, like they "always do," doomed to the relationship cycle of rupture, repair, and rupture again.

The wistful inevitability that both characters seem to feel in this song would have once been all that I could hear in its lyrics: though the characters love each other, neither is able to

[147] "Treacherous (Taylor's Version)," *Red (Taylor's Version).*

listen to the other. Listening to "The Alcott" now, however, I hear another possibility: the potential for reconnection. In this song, listeners finally encounter one of Berninger's characters that can determine how to *find* another, which he deems is possible by "break[ing] into [her] golden thinking." Though most of Berninger's characters would find this an impossible task, the narrator of "The Alcott" finds a way, and, as it turns out, the way is to silently listen: "I sit there silently / Waiting for you to look up. / I see you smile / When you see it's me." I could always hear Berninger's and Besser's characters longing for connection, but previously imagined that they were sending song after song into the ether just so they could hear their own voices echoing back, giving the illusion that someone was talking to them. No wonder they felt isolated and lonely, thinking that they were "easy to find," "standing in the same place" where they were "left." When I listen now, however, it seems to me that the echolocation they were performing was missing a crucial element: silence.

In their constant stream of output, Berninger's and Besser's personae were attempting to sound out their surroundings but were instead trapping themselves in a disorienting echo chamber. The only way out, the only way to make it, the only way to find connection, and the only hope was, all along, to listen. In the song "So Far So Fast" from *I Am Easy to Find*, Hannigan and Berninger sing together:

> Don't you know someday, somebody will come and find you?
>
> If you don't know who you are anymore, they will remind you
>
> ……………
>
> I will say your name out loud and you will be home.

Hope was always there in the National's songs, but, just like their characters, I had to recognize that hope isn't something you hear, it's something you must listen attentively for. Hope isn't

something you find; it's something you must continue to make. As I turn now to listening to Swift, I do so with an ear tuned not only to making it through trauma, but to (re)making myself: *(Bronwyn's Version)*.

Part Two: "I'm the problem, it's me":[148] Listening to Swift *(Taylor's Version)*

Swift approached writing *folklore* and *evermore* in a way she had never done before; rather than writing music and lyrics more or less simultaneously, she wrote into and back to Aaron Dessner's instrumental tracks. Swift describes Dessner sending her a batch of thirty "sketches" of instrumental tracks the day after she first reached out to him in April 2020: "[e]very single one of them was one of the most interesting, exciting things I had ever heard … I'd start writing as soon as I heard a new one. And oftentimes what I would send back would inspire him to make more instrumentals and then [he'd] send me [those]" (Suskind). When Swift wrote the lyrics for "coney island," the ninth track on *evermore*, she was writing with the National in mind, hoping that the rest of the band would collaborate on the track, which they did. Dessner describes the "weird" authorial liminality of "coney island": "it really does feel like Taylor, obviously, since she wrote all the words, but it also feels like a National song in a good way" (Shaffer). On both *folklore* and *evermore*, which emerged from a distant collaboration based primarily on two artists listening and responding to each other's work, Swift flexes what I contend is her greatest skill; close, rigorous, attentive listening.

Indeed, I argue that Swift's lyrics demonstrate a profound ability to attentively and innovatively listen to oneself. Swift's reclamation of her various selves throughout her career —

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[148] Swift, "Anti-Hero," *Midnights.*

what she refers to as her "eras," with each era corresponding to one of her albums — offers a productive model for engaging with the complexities of lyric self-narration, particularly in the context of identity reclamation. Swift's songs reflexively think through and perform how the self makes itself in fragments of oral/aural autobiography, and additionally how the self is made and re-made in the ear of the listener. I suggest that this making is most clearly audible in her first forays into fiction on *folklore* and *evermore*, retrospective self-representation on *Midnights*, and reclamation of her own sounded story, which she once considered to have been "stolen,"[149] through her ongoing *(Taylor's Version)* album re-recording project.

Swift's work offers a framework for listening to and expressing situated selfhood and explicitly invites audiences to listen in. I have always been drawn to Swift's ability to listen to her past selves with a combination of empathy and humility, as well as to how she performs that listening. Swift is both a generous and incisive listener in part because she listens to herself in context; it is a common trope that, when popstars achieve a certain level of fame and stardom, their writing increasingly fixates on their fame and isolation.[150] By contrast, Swift mostly manages to write about herself first and foremost as a *person,* even if, as she admitted when first introducing her song "Anti-Hero" (*Midnights*), the scale of her fame sometimes overwhelms her sense of self: "I struggle a lot with the idea that my life has become unmanageably sized … the

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[149] "When you can't sleep at night / you'll hear my stolen lullabies" (Swift, "my tears ricochet," (*folklore*).

[150] See Brodesser-Akner.

idea of not feeling like a person."[151] With her characteristically sharp self-awareness, she quickly adds, "[d]on't feel bad for me, you don't need to" (Swift, *Midnights Mayhem with Me* via Instagram).

Though Swift's existence under the microscope of unimaginable fame continues to, in many ways, exile her from the quotidian lives of the vast majority of her listeners, she persists in writing songs that are so personable that they dignify rather than denude everyday feelings. In writing about her own affective experiences with precise and particular detail, Swift's songs elevate the *agons* of ordinary people, especially girls and women, to her brand of folklore. She doesn't romanticize suffering, but instead offers a resonant container for living alongside its echoes. Swift's lyrics are stubbornly, wryly, mulishly hopeful, even when they're melancholic — evident even in a song about her mother's battle with cancer: "It's been years of hoping, and I keep saying it because, 'cause I have to"[152] ("Soon You'll Get Better" featuring the Chicks, *Lover*). For Swift, there's always hope to be made via reinvention, because writing, sounding, and listening for hope are imperative to survival.

More than any other artist in this dissertation, it is Swift's songs about herself, and how those songs listen to themselves, that made it safe for me to return to listening to music and to myself. My gratitude and fandom likely place me too close to these songs to be a fully objective critic; but then again, it is subjectivity that is the very subject of this work. As opposed to other

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[151] This is also evidenced in the second verse of "Anti-Hero" (*Midnights*): "I'm a monster on the hill / Too big to hang out, slowly lurching toward your favorite city."

[152] *invisible string*: "We know this world is good enough because it has to be" (Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*).

chapters in this dissertation, in which I record my attentive listening but not my own affective responses to those listenings, in this section, my self as a listener, critic, fan, and person emerge most clearly. In writing this record of my listening to — and yes, most certainly, fandom of— Swift, I am most interested in the ways her lyric personae construct, interrogate, dismantle, and reassemble herself as both a private self and a cultural icon, which is to say a public self. By centring my own listening I as the primary interlocuter with these texts, I am explicitly and intentionally echolocating myself and my own listening in relation to Swift's and, in particular, how my identity is tied up in my identification with Swift's *listening I*. Just as Swift must contend with the trials and tribulations of self-study, including the vulnerabilities that such openness willingly or accidentally exposes, there are clear affordances and limitations of this methodology of autoethnography that I can foresee, and likely as many that I'll miss.[153] I am less interested in disclosure for disclosure's sake and more in the ways in which we orient ourselves to confessional subjectivity; in particular, I am interested in the metareferential process of listening to the ways Swift's lyric personae invite and perform attentive listening.

There are many sonic environments in which to listen to Swift's songs, and even more positionalities from which to do so. For most bona fide "Swifties," the overwhelmingly immersive sonic environment of the Eras Tour represents the pinnacle of engaging with her material in public; though, as others have widely noted, the real achievement of the tour is its

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[153] In "Writing Autoethnography," Ronald J. Pelias similarly describes the methodology's give and take: since "the knower and known are intricately linked, how the researcher situates the 'self' becomes a rhetorical and open question, always demanding reflexivity and always carrying consequences" (121).

ability to make each attendee feel that they are having a personal, even private experience of Swift singing live.[154] Even those who are emphatically *not* fans of Swift must find it difficult to avoid hearing any of her songs, whether it be via the ubiquitous background hum of a grocery store speaker system, over the car radio, or, most recently, in the news coverage of NFL games.[155] Of course, it is not necessary to have knowledge of her biography nor to be a fan[156] in order to listen to her lyrics attentively. As Part One of this chapter and all other chapters in this dissertation have demonstrated, attentively listening only requires a commitment and openness to experiencing the present moment.

In fact, although I'd never trade the fun and community of my long-time Swift fandom, I'm occasionally envious of listeners who encounter Swift's lyric texts uncoupled from the dense

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[154] Petrusich, for example, describes the "startling intimacy" of the Eras Tour, where Swift "seems to be speaking directly to you, confessing something urgent" ("Startling Intimacy").

[155] Swift is currently dating NFL star Travis Kelce, who plays the position of tight end for the Kansas City Chiefs.

[156] I'm using *fan* following the lead of fandom studies, which generally holds that being a fan of an artist involves an interest in their biographical details and public persona in addition to appreciation for their output. In Mark Duffett's introduction to *Popular Music Fandom,* he defines musical fandom as "a cultural conviction ('I *love* Led Zep!') that combines a threshold of affective engagement with, variously or in combination, musical appreciation, music practice, celebrity-following, social networking, dancing, collecting, and self-expression" (7).

web of references, allusions, and what she calls “Easter eggs”[157] that pervade her songwriting. As someone who has been immersed in Swiftian lore and fandom for eighteen years, however, it’s impossible for me to extricate my own listening from Swift’s; she has trained me as a listener,[158] and, like many other fans, I have become an expert listener. My listening I is firmly

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[157] Swift’s longstanding practice of including “Easter eggs” in her musical and paramusical releases foregrounds the reciprocal relationship that she has built with her listeners. For a brief history of Swift’s Easter egging, see Merinuk.

Partly due to this dense web of allusion, I am fascinated by other peoples’ listening experience to Swift. It is one of the reasons that I, like so many other fans, love watching videos on social media of fan reactions to new music, non-fans discovering Swift’s discography for the first time, or listening to podcasts about listening to Swift. For more on this phenomenon, see Galloway, who discusses the ways podcasts about Swift create a “virtual sonic environment where listeners listen with and through the hosts’ embodied listening” (91).

[158] In reference to her fans’ dedication to uncovering “Easter eggs,” Swift explains, “I’ve trained [my fans] to be that way … I love that they like the cryptic hint-dropping. Because as long as they like it, I’ll keep doing it. It’s fun. It feels mischievous and playful” (Suskind).

In his chapter “Rhythmic Play, Compositional Intent, and Communication in Rock Music,” Nathan Hesselink writes about the ways in which “compositional intent” can engender “a special kind of *communication* with [the artist’s] audience…the musical work becomes an unspoken or hidden challenge to the listeners — the interior play projected outwards — as a kind of in-group or insider knowledge, the challenge resting on an audience's familiarity with the music as a shared body of expectations (Davies 2010, p. 24). Listening thus becomes a window into the creative act, something that happens everywhere in the world when performer-composers take their audience's listening and cognitive abilities, their imagination, seriously” (41-2).

situated in the broader mythos that Swift and her fans have co-created. Being a part of the global community of millions of Swift fans has been one of the most affirmative and positive constants in my life for many years; it is a source of hope and connection rooted in common appreciation rather than common grievance, too frequently the glue that binds people.

Over her last several albums, I have listened to Swift's listening I go through a process of de- and re-familiarization. Like so many other times in my life, the ways in which Swift's lyric persona sounds and listens to herself seems to map more or less serendipitously onto my own experiences and chronologies. Then again, perhaps it's the very opposite — that I, in the emergent process of listening to music that I identify with, make and remake the ways I sound and listen to myself in response. As I turn to my final set of close listenings in this dissertation, then, I'll sing and listen along with Swift's autobiographical chorus, "It's me, hi, / I'm the problem, it's me" ("Anti-Hero"), as I continue my weakly hopeful pursuit of echolocating my listening I.

"I can go anywhere I want, / just not home":[159] Swift's Listening I in Fictional "exile"[160]

In *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour Film,* Swift described her own songwriting prior to the release of *folklore* in July 2020 as highly personal and confessional, comparing her songs to diary entries. On *folklore* and *evermore*, however, which were written, recorded, and released during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Swift espoused a new approach, a comingling of fiction with experience in songs written from the perspectives of a cast of interrelated

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[159] "my tears ricochet," *folklore*.

[160] "exile," *folklore.*

characters. On *Instagram,* Swift has said that inhabiting the lives and experiences of characters rather than continuing to write about herself offered an imaginative escape from the loneliness of the early lockdowns into "fantasy, history, and memory." Try as she might to escape her own subject position, however, even Swift's "fictional" songs offer clear and profound insight into her lyric positionality. Swift's writing is unpretentious in that it is unremittingly expository; she intentionally and inadvertently exposes her largely autobiographical lyric personae both by how they describe themselves and also by how they perform reflexive listening. Swift "knows her personas," Mary Fogarty and Gina Arnold claim in their introduction to *Taking Taylor Seriously*, a special issue of *Contemporary Music Review*; indeed, she is "truly her own myth-making musical Paparazzo" (5). On *folklore* and *evermore*, I argue that Swift's stated foray into fiction can be heard as a listening apparatus for oblique self-reclamation in the face of an unprecedented loss of control over her own lyric mythmaking.

In writing *folklore* and *evermore*, Swift was clearly thinking about narrative, (auto)biography, and legacy in addition to escapism. In her official announcement of *folklore* on *Instagram*, Swift elucidates her choice of the album's title:

> A tale that becomes folklore is one that is passed down and whispered around. Sometimes even sung about. The lines between fantasy and reality blur and the boundaries between truth and fiction become almost indiscernible … I've told these stories to the best of my ability with all the love, wonder, and whimsy they deserve. Now it's up to you to pass them down. (Swift via Instagram)

In this statement and throughout *folklore*, Swift gestures to the communal nature of not only listening, but of relistening and resounding: she asks the listener to *sound* their listening by passing it down through whispers and song. Swift's community of listeners is constantly

performing their embodied listening to and for one another, whether via text or video on social media or, as my closest fellow Swiftie and *Eras Tour*–date Sonya and I did at the show, belting out the lyrics, partially back to Swift, and partially to each other, clutching our friendship-bracelet-bedecked hands.[161] Swift has been clear and consistent in the ways she involves listeners and fans in her work,[162] and in *The Eras Tour Film,* she talks about how the songs belong to "all of us." During the opening monologue of the Eras Tour, for example, Swift repeats close variants of the same script:

> These are songs that I wrote about my feelings, or my life, or stories I created in my imagination. Maybe that's what you think about when you hear these songs out in the

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[161] Following a line in "You're on Your Own, Kid" (*Midnights*), "So make the friendship bracelets, take this moment and taste it," fans have been making and exchanging friendship bracelets with each other at every *Eras Tour* stop. Each bracelet is built using beads that spell out a word or phrase that relates to Swift and/or Swiftiedom, which serves as a complex network of inside jokes and obscure lyric knowledge dating back over eighteen years. Friendship bracelets have become synonymous with Swift's brand, and their adoption and free exchange between fans is emblematic of the kind, positive, and mutually supportive fandom that Swift has fostered.

[162] For example, Swift released four deluxe versions of her 2019 album *Lover*, each of which included different diary entries that Swift wrote when she was starting her career. "[I]mportantly," Fogarty and Arnold write, the albums "also included blank pages meant to prompt her young fans toward their own forms of self-expression" (3).

world. But after tonight, I want you to be thinking about us, and the memories we made here together.[163]

Swift is a shrewd listener — to herself, to her fans, and to the ways in which performing her own listening allows others to identify themselves within the precise and particular minutiae of her confessional lyrics. Swift's songs perform attentive listening such that the listener feels listened to. In other words, when I listen to a Swift song, I not only feel as though it is listening back to me, but also that it is providing me with a new way to listen. Her songs are sonic containers that give me an embodied and resonant space within which to pay careful attention to myself.

Though Swift is trying something new on *folklore* and *evermore*, her lyric personae are audibly preoccupied by the past, real and fictional. The first lines of *folklore's* opening track, "the 1," for example, neatly set up the album's chronological tension. The song's speaker proudly proclaims their newfound independence, then immediately undercuts themselves by letting slip their enduring preoccupation with the past in the form of an uncannily familiar stranger: "I'm doing good, I'm on some new shit. / Been saying yes instead of no. / I thought I saw you at the bus stop, / I didn't though."

In "cardigan" — the album's second track and first single, and the lyrics of which Aaron Dessner describes as having been written only a few hours into their distant collaboration and arriving via email "like a lightning bolt" (McCormick) — the speaker repeats the line, "When you are young they assume you know nothing," but ends the song with, "I knew everything when

[163] Transcribed from a livestream of Swift's most recent show at the time of writing, night four in Sydney, Australia, 26 February 2024.

I was young." "cardigan" is the first of a trio of songs on *folklore* that Swift refers to on the *Eras Tour Film* as three perspectives of a fictional "teenage love triangle," marking the first time that Swift has given her first-person narrators names other than her own. On *evermore*, the speaker of "'tis the damn season" attempts to briefly re-live her past by having a weekend-long fling with a former lover: "We could call it even, / you could call me 'babe' for the weekend … the road not taken looks real good now / and it always leads to you, and my hometown." In this way, Swift's speakers audibly make and remake the stories that they tell themselves about who they are.

On the third track on *folklore*, however, "the last great american dynasty," Swift's own lyric persona returns to the forefront. The song starts by recounting the history of Rebekah Harkness, the former owner and occupant of a house in Rhode Island that Swift purchased in 2013. In a lyrical turn Swift credits as a "country music standard narrative device" (Suskind), she sings the first verses and choruses about Harkness but breaks the fourth wall in the final verse and chorus: "Holiday House sat quietly on that beach / free of women with madness, their men and bad habits / and then it was bought by me." As Swift describes it, "you go, 'Surprise! It was me!' You bring it personal for the last verse" (Suskind). When Swift performs "the last great american dynasty" live at the Eras Tour, this moment of swapped lyrical subjects is accompanied by choreography in which the dancer who plays the role of Rebekah pauses by Swift on the stairs, meets her eyes and nearly touches her hand, then ascends into the shadows while Swift descends into the spotlight.

In a similar blend of fiction with reality, though the fifth track on *evermore* is inspired by Daphne Du Maurier's 1938 novel *Rebecca*, the details of the lyrics seem to anticipate another of Swift's persona's crumbling relationships. "tolerate it," which is ostensibly fictional, directly prefigures Swift's song "You're Losing Me" on *Midnights*, an album explicitly written about

sleepless nights in Swift's own life. "tolerate it" is a seething, devasted meditation on love that doesn't feel reciprocal; in the chorus, the speaker repeats, "I know my love should be celebrated / but you tolerate it." The bridge of "tolerate it" revolves around the speaker's sadness and anger at feeling left behind and ignored by a partner who takes her for granted:

> While you were out building other worlds, where was I?
>
> Where's that man who'd throw blankets over my barbed wire?
>
> I made you my temple, my mural, my sky,
>
> now I'm begging for footnotes in the story of your life,
>
> drawing hearts in the byline,
>
> always taking up too much space or time.

Three years later, Swift released the song "You're Losing Me" on the extended version of *Midnights.* Written over the pulsing percussion of a sample of Swift's own heartbeat, the speaker similarly feels ignored and taken for granted by her partner:

> How long could we be a sad song
>
> 'til we were too far gone to bring back to life?
>
> I gave you all my best me's, my endless empathy,
>
> And all I did was bleed as I tried to be the bravest soldier
>
> fighting in only your army frontlines.
>
> Don't you ignore me.
>
> I'm the best thing at this party (and you're losing me).
>
> And I wouldn't marry me either, a pathological people-pleaser
>
> who only wanted you to see her.

In “tolerate it,” the speaker uses contrasting ekphrastic metaphors to describe the imbalance of her relationship; while she made her partner her “temple,” “mural,” and her “sky,” he is “out building other worlds” and she’s left “begging for footnotes” in his life story. In “You’re Losing Me,” the speaker also uses an ekphrastic metaphor, but strips it of the hyperbolic whimsy of “my temple, my mural, my sky.” In this song, the speaker makes a metamusical reference to the “sad song[s]” that she and her partner have become. In “You’re Losing Me,” the speaker reclaims her rightful place as the artist, and casts her partner in the less flattering role of a negligent army general. In “You’re Losing Me,” Swift’s persona has tired of offering up a cast of different selves — “I gave you all my best me’s” — and has decided that *she* will no longer “tolerate it”: “Don’t you ignore me. / I’m the best thing at this party.”

When I first listened to “tolerate it,” it was an intolerably sad experience; I listened to it once, and then put it aside. It was only when Swift released “You’re Losing Me” just over three years later that I returned to “tolerate it”; I was better equipped to tolerate affective discomfort following a great deal of therapy, and I was curious about the parallels between the songs that I could hear echoes of even years after a single listen. This time around, there was something incredibly comforting about listening to Swift use fiction and literature to make sense of her life in much the same way that I do. Just as Swift needed several years to stew over a fictional relationship’s demise in “tolerate it” via *Rebecca* before she could write her own long-term relationship into dissolution in “You’re Losing Me,” I needed years of listening to Swift’s fictions before I could turn my ear inwards. To make it out of trauma, I first had to listen in, to tune and retune myself to the delicate frequencies of hope.

"I didn't have it in myself to go with grace":[164] Stolen Selfhood

Swift wrestles and plays with semi-fictional personae throughout *folklore*, but nowhere is the nature of lyric selfhood more at issue than in the fifth track, "my tears ricochet." For the initiated listener, there is a subtext to track five on any Swift album; Swift has established a pattern of sequencing songs that she considers to be the album's most "honest, emotional, vulnerable, and personal as track five," as she claims in a 2019 *Instagram* post. On *folklore*, the fifth spot goes to a song in which the speaker has suffered an unspeakable loss and betrayal. *folklore* was written at a time when Swift was grappling with the aftermath of a highly public and publicized battle over the sale of her musical back catalogue, and motifs of entrapment, censure, and betrayal echo through nearly every track. "my tears ricochet" seems to most directly tell the story of what it feels like, to Swift, to have her life's work "stolen" from her. When Swift's former label, Big Machine Records, sold the masters to her first six albums, it was to another figure from her past, music manager and hedge fund investor Scooter Braun. Swift released a statement on Tumblr about why the details of this sale were her "worst case scenario":

> All I could think about was the incessant, manipulative bullying I've received at [Braun's] hands for years … [like] when his client, Kanye West, organized a revenge porn music video which strips my body naked. Now Scooter has stripped me of my life's work, that I wasn't given an opportunity to buy. Essentially, my musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it.

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[164] "my tears ricochet," *folklore.*

For Swift, losing ownership over her musical personae was a ruthless stripping of autonomy and selfhood. To lose ownership over her life stories — her legacy — was akin to losing her relationship to herself.

Just as with "tolerate it," I could listen to "my tears ricochet" when *folklore* was first released only once. Hearing Swift's persona articulate what felt like the violent death of her conception of self — including and especially her ability to assess and judge the character of the people she loved and entered into relationship with — landed too close to home. Experiencing and living with trauma is profoundly disorienting, and I felt alienated from any solid sense of self for many years; it wouldn't be hyperbole to borrow Swift's words from another song, "Look What You Made Me Do" (*Reputation*), to suggest that the "old" me was "dead." For months after *folklore* came out, the spectre of this song haunted me, ringing gloomily in my ears. Try as I might, I couldn't get the line "I can go anywhere I want, anywhere I want, just not home" out of my head. I, too, felt as though trauma had exiled me to a lonely and unfamiliar land, without even my previous sense of self as a companion. In the years since, I have slowly returned to listening to "my tears ricochet" when playing *folklore* start to finish, but I avoided listening to it attentively until embarking on this writing project. There is something that feels remarkably healing about turning my attention to this song now that I've remade a solid sense of self; in attending to these lyrics, I am also, finally, tending to my own old wounds.

The speaker of "my tears ricochet" speaks from beyond the metaphorical grave, addressing bitter recriminations to her betrayer for not only the death of their relationship, but the death of her previous persona; in other words, the death of who she used to be. There is a recurring motif of death, dying, and murder throughout the song, tied into a larger metaphor of mutually assured destruction. The speaker warns the auditor that, though they may have

effectively ended the life of the person she used to be, doing so has simultaneously sealed their own figurative death warrant: "If I'm on fire, you'll be made of ashes too … You had to kill me, but it killed you just the same." Less than karmic retribution, the ripple effects of inflicting pain and trauma on another person resound throughout this song, with the narrator singing about the enduring echoes and resonances of rupture and betrayal. If the song's persona has to live in these echoes, she wants her betrayer to have them stuck in their head like a catchy melodic earworm.

There is an elision here of water metaphors, including waves, storms, and tears, with sound metaphors, including soundwaves, whispers, and ghostly, disembodied echoes. The song's title combines both; the speaker's tears[165] ricochet — or rebound, echo, reverberate. In the bridge, the narrator describes and enacts some of these reverberations: "And I still talk to you (when I'm screaming at the sky) / And when you can't sleep at night (you hear my stolen lullabies)." The parts of these lines that are in parentheses are performed as if they are themselves an echo — they are sung in a higher octave and are produced to have a distant, echoey sound. The speaker's screams and "stolen lullabies" "haunt" the auditor ("You know I didn't want to have to haunt you, / but what a ghostly scene"), such that they end up "cursing [her] name." In metaphorically losing herself, the speaker also loses the ability to handle the disillusion of this relationship with "grace": "I didn't have it in myself to go with grace / And so the battleships will sink beneath the waves." Swift has indeed found a way to metaphorically *sink* those who have betrayed her: she has reclaimed her life stories, voice, and sense of self by

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[165] These "tears" are surely in part a reference to one of Swift's earliest singles, "Teardrops on My Guitar" (*Taylor Swift*), which similarly combines crying with singing and listening: "He's the reason for these teardrops on my guitar … He's the song in the car I keep singing, don't know why I do."

reclaiming her soundwaves, which is to say by re-sounding herself through her *(Taylor's Version)* project, but also, as this chapter has been arguing, through lyrics that attentively encourage *listening back* to the self.

"Give me back my girlhood, it was mine first":[166] Reclaiming Selfhood (Taylor's Version)

In November 2020, Swift announced that she had embarked on an ambitious project: re-recording the masters of all six of the albums that had been stolen from her so that she could reassert her ownership over her life's narrative work. The first re-recorded album she released, in April 2021, was a re-recording of her 2008 sophomore album *Fearless*, titled *Fearless (Taylor's Version).* Since April 2021, Swift has released three more re-recordings in quick succession: *Red (Taylor's Version)*, *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*, and *1989 (Taylor's Version).* Many fans have drawn attention to the fact that Swift has only two more titles left to reclaim; her name, in the form of her self-titled debut album *Taylor Swift (Taylor's Version)*, and her *Reputation (Taylor's Version)*. In each case, the parenthetical *(Taylor's Version)* is affixed to not only the album titles but also the titles of each track, such that to properly cite one of these songs, it looks like this: "Blank Space (Taylor's Version)" *1989 (Taylor's Version)*. Swift's continual reiteration of her own first name[167] in the titles of her re-recorded works both provides a clear taxonomy for version control and also connotes a deliberate, personal possessiveness. Calling these re-

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[166] "Would've, Could've, Should've," *Midnights (3am Edition).*

[167] Her use of *Taylor* as opposed to *Swift* or *Taylor Swift* coheres with the personable, down-to-earth persona she performs: Swift habitually introduces herself to every live crowd by saying, "Hi, I'm Taylor!" — as if we don't already know "All Too Well."

recordings "versions" is a similarly provocative choice; the Latin root of *version* is *vertĕre,* or "to turn," and *version* is defined variously as the "particular form of a statement, account, report, etc., given by one person or party," a "special form or variant of something," and a "turning about; a change of direction" ("Version"). Swift's *turn* as a writer can be read as both a shifting of focus and a confident statement of ownership: *my turn*.

The stated goal of the *(Taylor's Version)* re-recording project is reclamation via replacement: Swift hopes that her fans switch from listening to the original albums to listening to *(Taylor's Version)* instead.[168] In order to minimize friction for listeners choosing the new versions over the old, beloved ones, Swift has to attempt to make her new versions sound as identical as possible to the originals. It is this process of attempted acoustic replication that I find compelling: the *(Taylor's Version)* project not only explicitly performs Swift's own self-listening, but also invites fans to metacritically listen back to their own listening. In other words, when I listen to *(Taylor's Version)* of a song that I am intimately familiar with, part of what I'm hearing is the legacy of my own listening. Like any other sense memory, hearing these songs partially anew prompts memories of where I was the first time I heard the track, or nostalgia for important moments in my life for which this song served as a soundtrack. There is a similar pleasure in hearing other fans discuss their listening histories prompted by *(Taylor's Version)* album releases, and podcasts and social media posts in which fans and critics perform and discuss their embodied (re)listenings have proliferated.[169]

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[168] And largely, they have; see Lipshutz.

[169] For more on this, see Galloway.

Though the *(Taylor's Version)* albums that have been released so far are remarkably faithful to the originals, there are subtle differences throughout of timbre, breath, instrumentation, and production. For the attentive listener, the differences are unmistakeable, and many fans have devoted their time to mapping each moment of sonic departure.[170] It is fascinating to hear how Swift listens to and covers herself, how her new versions engage with, play with, edit, and alter her past personae. Some of the changes, such as a lyric update in the song "Better Than Revenge" on *Speak Now (Taylor's Version)*, are the results of Swift's perspectives and opinions changing over the thirteen years since the original album's release.[171] Other changes have more to do with the maturation and deepening of Swift's voice; singing these songs at age thirty-three is going to sound different than recording them as a teenager. It is the songs that sound the most eerily similar, however, that sound the magnitude of Swift's re-recording undertaking; Swift and her collaborators must perform incredibly attentive listenings of her original masters in order to be able to re-sound them accurately. In other words, Swift's re-creative re-recordings are less achievements of accurate sounding and more of attentive listening.

"Blank Space (Taylor's Version)" performs a particularly compelling iteration of Swift's self-listening and positioning. "Blank Space," which was first released in 2014 as one of the lead

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[170] Nora Princiotti and Nathan Hubbard trace many of these differences on their podcast, *Every Single Album: Taylor Swift.*

[171] "Better Than Revenge" initially included the line, "She's better known for the things that she does on the mattress" (2010), which in 2023 Swift amended to, "He was a moth to the flame, she was holding the matches."

singles on *1989*, parodies the persona that the media was fabricating and superimposing on Swift at the time. Swift was often cast as simultaneously vacuous and calculating, seductive and off-putting. Rather than fight back against these mischaracterizations, Swift wrote a song from the perspective of this persona, inhabiting and performing the caricature in order to reclaim her own narrative. In "Blank Space," the persona performs the arc of a brief, immediately doomed romantic relationship for the dubious benefit of a prospective lover by singing into existence a heady story of what their relationship would look, feel, and sound like. The speaker is aware of the false image that she is projecting, and doesn't shy away from letting the auditor into the illusion. In fact, she seems to suggest that the illusion is the main part of the allure: "I could show you incredible things; / Magic, madness, heaven, sin … Find out what you want, / be that girl for a month … 'Cause darling I'm a nightmare, dressed like a daydream." "Blank Space (Taylor's Version)" is one of the re-recordings with the most fidelity to the original, perhaps in part because Swift didn't have to try to sound like herself, but rather step back into character. In "Blank Space (Taylor's Version)," Swift listens attentively to her previous self's attentive listening in order to satirize the media's *inattentive* listening.

For me, listening to the *(Taylor's Version)* albums is simultaneously joyful and painful, nostalgic and triggering. Overall, however, getting the chance to listen to the ways in which Swift listens to and (re)constitutes herself aurally/orally has been actively therapeutic; the process of listening closely to old memories, re-sounding them, and then recasting their significance closely mirrors my experience of undergoing trauma therapy. Listening to Swift listening to herself gives me a sonic environment within which to listen to myself, and permission to turn my listening I back on myself with empathy and compassion. Swift's re-sounded, doubled archive continues to provide me with a model for reckoning with the echoes of

the past, offering proof positive that it's possible to turn/tune your ear to the future without silencing every previous version of yourself. As it turns out, you can retune your *listening I,* and make the choice to pay close, careful attention to "the hope of it all."[172]

"All along there was some invisible string":[173] Collaborative Conclusions

It's not often that two of your favourite artists, each from radically different genres, come together in collaboration. I'm not sure whether I always heard something in common with both artists, or if an "invisible string" of fate bizarrely rewarded the eccentricities of my musical taste, but either way, I have listened with rapt attention and fascination as the National and Swift, two major figures in my life, joined forces. Listening to them — and listening to them listening to each other — has been a significant pleasure and privilege. Prior to the release of *folklore,* I privately wished that I could find a way to work Swift into my dissertation, but couldn't imagine fitting her into my writing on, well, "sad dads." It came as a great surprise to me, therefore, that not only would Swift find her own way into my thesis, but that she would also facilitate my return to writing about and listening to one of the artists I had always intended to include: the "sad dads" themselves.

Swift is constantly reinventing herself, and it just so happened that this reinvention reinvigorated my own reclamation of my persona as a researcher and academic. Listening to Swift and the National in collaboration not only allowed me to make it through the aftermath of trauma and the thick of a global pandemic; it also enabled me to finish making this dissertation, a

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[172] "august," *folklore.*

[173] "invisible string," *folklore.*

formal record of my listening. It is with great excitement and no small measure of disbelief, therefore, that I await Swift and Dessner's next collaborative effort; in another, almost comically apt tug on that *invisible string*, Swift has a new album coming out the very same day I am submitting this dissertation. And, believe it or not, it's called *The Tortured Poets Department*. Hopefully I'll find you there.

Conclusion

"Something better. Something beautiful":[174] Weak Futurity

"Hold on to the corners of today, and we'll fold it up to save until it's needed. Stand still.
Let me scrub that brackish line that you got when something rose and then receded.
Hold on."
(the Weakerthans, "Watermark," *Left and Leaving*)

As I reach the conclusion of this project — the final act of my *Dissertation Era*, if you will — I find myself thinking about extending the scope of this project to listen for weak hope in other songs, artists, and literary forms. The first songs I would listen to are, of course, from Swift's forthcoming album *The Tortured Poets Department*. Even before its release, this album shows promise of being Swift's deepest and most deliberate engagement in literature and literary culture. I am also interested, however, in listening beyond the artists already accounted for in this dissertation. In this conclusion, I mark some of the turns that this project could take. First, I listen briefly to some of the newer artists to emerge from the National and Swift's web of influence, Phoebe Bridgers and boygenius. Second, I extend the attendant questions of this dissertation to start to think about what it might sound like to listen for representations of weak hope in other forms of literature.

Listening for Reckless Hope with Phoebe Bridgers and boygenius

Bridgers (born 1994) is a Grammy Award–winning alternative folk-pop singer-songwriter from California. I first listened to Bridgers when she recorded "Walking on a String,"

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[174] Samson, "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World" (single).

a duet with Berninger for the soundtrack of the 2019 film *Between Two Ferns*. Bridgers has gone on to write and sing with the National many times,[175] and also, as of 2021, with Swift.[176] While I was immediately drawn in by the breathy vulnerability of Bridgers's vocal delivery, when I listened to her 2017 album *Stranger in the Alps* I was struck by the raw, self-aware directness of her lyrics. The album's second track and single, "Motion Sickness," for example, sounds the affective nausea that can linger with a person who has endured the bumpy cycle of an abusive relationship. "Motion Sickness" is allegedly written about American musician Ryan Adams,[177] who Bridgers, along with a chorus of other women, accused of abuse in 2019 (Coscarelli and Ryzik).

The song sets the stakes for the power imbalance inherent in the age-gap between the speaker and auditor in the opening lines, "I hate you for what you did / and I miss you like a little

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[175] Bridgers featured on the title track of *Laugh Track*, and on "This Isn't Helping" and "Your Mind is Not Your Friend" on *The First Two Pages of Frankenstein.*

[176] Bridgers featured on "Nothing New (Taylor's Version)," a bonus track on *Red (Taylor's Version)* in 2021 and was an opening act for twelve dates of Swift's Era's Tour in 2023.

[177] In 2015, Adams recorded and self-released a full-length cover of Swift's 2014 album *1989*. Taste-making music publications like *Pitchfork*, which had thus far refused to review any of Swift's albums, including Swift's own Grammy-winning *1989*, acknowledged Adams's version (see Wickman's article in *Slate* for a summary of this issue). Adams changed all of the pronouns on the album to express male-centred and male-led love stories, and he also changed some of the lyrics. In one particularly misogynistic example, he changed Swift's lyrics in "Style" from "Good girl faith in a tight little skirt" to "Good girl faith thing, ass so tight." *Pitchfork* did review Swift's 2017 album *reputation*, as well as her subsequent albums. In 2019, *Pitchfork* retrospectively reviewed Swift's entire back catalogue.

kid," and returns to them in the bridge, "You said when you met me you were bored / And you, you were in a band when I was born." In the first two lines of the chorus, Bridgers directly addresses the emotional fallout of living through the up-down, push-pull dynamics of abuse: "I have emotional motion sickness, / somebody roll the windows down." In the second and final lines of the chorus, however, the narrator reclaims a kind of agency. Though she sings, "There are no words in the English language / I could scream to drown you out," as it turns out, she didn't need to scream in order to upend the dynamic between herself and her abuser. In "Motion Sickness," Bridgers quietly set in motion a sequence of events that would lead to Adams being formally accused of abuse by a group of women just two years after the song's release.

Bridgers released her sophomore album, *Punisher*, in June 2020, several months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the album explicitly broods about the end of times, it frequently sounds moment of weak, reckless hope. The final track, for example, starts as a quiet, mournful elegy for a relationship that dissolves due to a growing distance between the speaker and auditor, but resolves into a wild, screaming cacophony of joy and rage about "the end" of things. "I Know the End" concludes with the speaker listing snippets of images and sounds that accumulate while she drives down a highway at breakneck speed:

> Windows down, scream along
>
> to some America First rap-country song,
>
> a slaughterhouse, an outlet mall,
>
> slot machines, fear of God.
>
> ……….
>
> No, I'm not afraid to disappear.
>
> The billboard said, "The End Is Near,"

I turned around, there was nothing there,

Yeah, I guess the end is here.

Even facing “the end,” the speaker is obstinately, recklessly hopeful, singing, “I’m not going to go down with my hometown in a tornado, / I’m going to chase it.” Bridgers writes with the kind of resigned, ironic, stoic optimism that is typical of people who are conscious of being born at what Francis Fukuyma calls *The End of History.* Bridgers sounds loss, abuse, fear, and trauma with a steely eyed, self-effacing humour: she “takes the weakest thing in [her], and then beat[s] the bastards with it” (Stars, “Hold on When You Get Love and Let Go When You Give It,” *The North*). In this way, Bridgers not only wrestles with the weak, recalcitrant hope that I hear in the other artists in this dissertation, but also evolves it.

Bridgers is also a member of boygenius, a Grammy-winning alternative rock supergroup, along with fellow American musicians Lucy Dacus and Julien Baker. The three members of boygenius, all of whom identify as queer women, amplify each other’s already prodigious strengths as lyricists and songwriters. Dacus and Baker have also collaborated with and opened tours for both the National and Swift.[178] On their most recent album, *the record*, boygenius

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[178] Baker and Berninger, for example, composed and sang “All I Want” for the first volume of *7-inches for Planned Parenthood* (2018), a collection of vinyl recorded and released with the aim of raising funds and awareness for Planned Parenthood. Dacus opened the National’s summer 2022 tour and joined them on stage to perform the National’s song “Rylan.” boygenius opened for Swift’s Eras Tour on May 6, 2023, in Nashville.

sounds many of this project's central themes, including weakness,[179] listening,[180] and making.[181] On the eighth track, "Leonard Cohen," for example, voiced primarily by Dacus, the speaker turns a simple story about listening to music on a long drive ("On the on-ramp, you said, / 'if you love me, you will listen to this song'") into an irreverent parable about searching for "tiny lengthening[s] of light" (Samson, "Winter Wheat," *Winter Wheat*):

> Leonard Cohen once said,
>
> "There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"
>
> and I am not an old man having an existential crisis
>
> at a Buddhist monastery, writing horny poetry,
>
> But I agree. I never thought you'd happen to me.

For additional subtly pointed, quietly hilarious songs about listening for weak hope, in future versions of this project I would also plan to attend to Dacus's and Baker's most recent solo albums, *Home Video* and *Little Oblivions* respectively (both released in 2021).

Improvisatory Listening, Listening Elsewhere

There are several directions in which I could extend the theoretical scope of this dissertation. For me, the most compelling option is to think about improvisatory listening, that is,

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[179] Track six, "Not Strong Enough": "I don't know why I am / not strong enough to be your man."

[180] Track ten, "We're in Love": "I told you of your past lives, every man you've ever been / It wasn't flattering / but you listened like it mattered."

[181] Track seven, "Revolution 0": "Imaginary friend / You live up in my head / So I've been making music / Since you told me to do it."

how attentive listening works in the context of improvisation. I have done some thinking in this direction already in my work on Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq,[182] who improvises her live and recorded performances along with her collaborators. Improvised, responsive listening is, in some ways, an inherently vulnerable, *weak* practice, riddled with the potential for dissonance. Improvised music — what you *make* of, with, and from listening in situ — emerges from the resonant space between your collaborators' embodied listening and your own. The potential for dissonance, however, is also what makes improvisatory listening so full of potent potential.

Zooming even further out, I can envision expanding this dissertation's formal constraints to think about representations of listening for weak hope in film, poetry, and novels. In particular, I'd be interested in close reading narratives in which fictional characters *make it* through times of crisis by listening to, or making, music. I started to explore versions of this idea in two undergraduate courses I designed and taught in 2021 at the University of British Columbia, the first titled "Songs for the End of the World" after Saleema Nawaz's 2020 novel of

[182] Some of this work is written, researched, and conceptualized in collaboration with Kevin McNeilly, my doctoral supervisor.

the same name,[183] and the second a bit broader, "Hope and Crisis in Contemporary Literature."[184]

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[183] Abridged course description for ENGL 110 S1:

We often hear the phrase "music saved my life," but what does that actually mean? How do the experiences of either listening to or making music impact our lives? How are these experiences represented not only in literature, but in songs themselves? In this course, we'll ask some big questions about what it means to survive and think through the roles of art in survival. These questions feel especially pressing as we pass the one-year mark of the covid-19 pandemic. Together we will read the novel *Songs for the End of the World* (2020) by Saleema Nawaz, a selection of critical readings and poetry, short stories by authors including James Baldwin and Maya Angelou, and listen to a whole bunch of music.

[184] Abridged course description for ENGL 100 W1:

In this course we will read and listen to a variety of twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts that consider ongoing crises — climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, racism and xenophobia, truth and reconciliation, and family/inherited trauma — and question where, how, and if these texts are able to locate hope. We will ask some big questions about the ethics of hope and hopefulness, the roles of art in crisis, and why it's more urgent than ever to engage with literature in all its forms. Texts will include a selection of short stories, the animated film based on the graphic novel/album *The Secret Path* by Gord Downie and Jeff Lemire, excerpts from Tanya Tagaq's audiobook recording of her novel *Split Tooth*, the albums *Winter Wheat* by John K. Samson and *The Sunset Tree* by John Darnielle, the novel *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, and a selection of poetry.

"Post-doc Blues":[185] Conclusions

At the time of writing, I am starting to imagine, and sometimes even starting to experience, what listening to music without the dampening filter of unprocessed trauma sounds like. It's easier, now, to listen for weak hope; easier to gather it, hold it, and allow it to hold me. Holding — to hold and to be held; to behold and be beholden — is one of the strongest threads weaving through this project, though I wasn't able to hear it until I stitched all of its pages into "one, rough, seamless cloth" (Fellows, "Certainty," *Femmes de chez nous*). *Holding* is everywhere, from the quotation that forms part of the title of this dissertation, "Hold ourselves together with our arms around the stereo" (the National, "Apartment Story," *Boxer*), to Vivat Virtute's *Hold Music.* It is central to Fellows's notion of taking what is weak and abject and holding it "in the light." On *The Sunset Tree*, Darnielle's persona "hold[s] on / for dear life" by holding onto his abusive stepfather's metaphorical "Lion's Teeth." In "New Year's Day" (*Reputation*), Swift sings, "Hold on to the memories, / they will hold on to you." Holding onto weak hope is, for me, a gentle gesture of gathering and embrace rather than clutching or constraint. To borrow again from the language of therapy, I imagine holding onto — or holding out for — weak hope to be akin to "holding space" for development and disclosure.

It is only now, as I metaphorically hold this dissertation in my hands, that I am able to register how these pages have also *held space for me*. I have long been aware that attentively listening to music has the potential to help people — to help me — make it through and beyond trauma. Since returning from medical leave to finish this project, however, I have become attuned to the fact that making this record of my listening has also been a vital part of me

[185] Samson, *Winter Wheat.*

"making it." I feel self-conscious and a bit vulnerable in admitting this, but in some ways this dissertation has come to feel like my version of *The Sunset Tree*: partly an oblique record of my trauma, but more significantly a tangible record that I did, indeed, make it through trauma in order to *make this.* Forgive me if I'm sliding into the maudlin, but as the National would say, "If you want / to see me cry / play 'Let it Be' / or 'Nevermind' ("Don't Swallow the Cap," *Trouble Will Find Me*).

Final Encore: Listening at the "End of the World"[186]

On July 24, 2020,[187] Samson quietly released a single that he now identifies as marking the probable "close" of his tenure under the moniker John K. Samson (qtd. in Soden). The song is about as angry and impassioned as Samson, a "talk-singing sober leftist vegetarian Quaker" ("About") ever sounds. "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World" is both a scathing indictment of former US President Donald Trump, especially his COVID-era policies, and a commitment to "help organize something better." The song opens with the line, "I manage my fantasy baseball team better than I manage my anger these days, and I'd trade my best pitcher for a draft-pick and picture of the president writhing in pain." "Fantasy Baseball" is in part a meditation on the inane hobbies with which we distract and soothe ourselves while the world seems to be, in many ways, at its "end," and in part a frustrated fantasy about the president dying a painful death. "It's a weird thing to wish for," the speaker acknowledges, but "I can't stop wishing."

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[186] Samson, "Fantasy Baseball at the End of the World" (single).

[187] The same day that Swift released *folklore* — another very big day for me.

Though the majority of the song seems to be dourly focused on the lateness of it all — "the End of the World" — Samson's characteristic weak hope returns at the song's close. Even though, when the current president dies, "the next fascist fucker" will be "in line for the job of demolishing hope for us all," organized resistance is plausible, "better," and "beautiful. The song closes with the lines: "So I'm putting in love now, I'm putting in faith, putting fear on a long-term IL. I'm going outside, I'm going to help organize something better. Something beautiful." "Fantasy Baseball" sounds a quiet promise of futurity: as long as there are "fascist fucker[s] in line for the job of demolishing hope," there will also be people who resist demolition. In this way, I hear weak hope as a *construction* — something you have to *listen for* and *make* — and, as long as we put in the work, we can "help organise something better." Maybe, just maybe, we might make "Something beautiful."

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Appendix: "Diss Tracks"

For ease of access, I have published public playlists on Spotify for each part of this dissertation that include all of the songs I reference. Exceptions are some songs by John K. Samson, Christine Fellows, and Vivat Virtute which can be found only on *Bandcamp* or hard copy, and some songs by the Mountain Goats, which are available only on *Soundcloud* or hard copy.

Links to my chapter playlists are as follows:

Introduction:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4Pl5kuiuNuDrIfESQo6ufx?si=3911bea114254ba9

Chapter One (John K. Samson):

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2zoyoYEtIbFh2eofMpX5yp?si=b7d4dc0fbce94145

Interlude (Vivat Virtute):

https://vivatvirtute.bandcamp.com

Chapter Two (Christine Fellows):

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7wvZ4s8MbyDk3ss3Wgs7yP?si=1470d65feb244f07

Chapter Three (The Mountain Goats):

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6ldcIfRpjiyFW5ahzQihWI?si=895e5b4ba7f74849

Chapter Four (The National and Taylor Swift):

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4ishRKouCTe7DOz5S3Oefd?si=e0c2204476264e54

Conclusion:

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1YxdypxvzmHeKabktkNkwS?si=69b22504b25a4a2d