

46 TAPES

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Apocalyptic romanticism means
nihilism and faith are strange cousins
music is about everything else
including itself
and ourself

I've just unstuck one of my old mixed tapes from the bottom of a box. The title of this one is from that grade-school song: *I like to oat oat oat oat oat...pples and bononos...* And so on. Side A is Apples, Side B is Bananas. Symmetrical, tidy. The track titles are penned – yes, *penned* – in green ink from a Sheaffer fountain pen, 'Italic M' calligraphic nib, in a melodramatic, elongated hand. The mix is badly ordered and amateur, but I still love it entirely; the songs are unified by one simple fact: *I like(d) them*. Call it musical masturbation. From me, of me, for me and my pleasure only. *I want I like* is enough. Mine. I click the tape into place. My guts rearrange for some songs into some older version of my interior, trying to transplant the music like sonorous organs. Some take; some my body rejects. I giggle; I tear up – it tickles when adolescence pokes you in the ribs.

One week ago, my husband and I standing by my Grandma Zee's new headstone in Missouri, singing "Amazing Grace" badly, my Aunt Janet pouring ashes out of a reused bread bag into a grave. One month ago, blurry goodbyes then blurry hellos: an old dual ritual called "leaving home," called "coming home." After two-and-a-half years in Hanoi of teaching, writing, eating, living good. Made the rounds in Colorado, tried to talk but our mouths were upside-down and sideways, in the wrong hemisphere. Unearthed boxes from storage, sorted, tossed, repacked, loaded up. A U-Haul and a dolly, us and all our shit and the old Subaru wagon behind us. We drove away at dawn on a Wednesday, split between a feeling of moving back and moving on.

Don't know how we got here except by trusting none of this is real. A good mix on the iPod helped: cocktail of old and new rolling us across the Great Plains. A familiar soundtrack of our lives

together – his favorite, my favorites – but as surreal now as we are to ourselves, repatriated as we are, a post-migratory species.

One month later, a six-month lease and two rooms. A 1930s upper duplex in Corcoran Park, Minneapolis, run-down and cramped. “Fringe” neighborhood, people tell us, but looks like a green Eden to us. I miss Hanoi, though, miss it maybe for no other reason than it’s passed, unattainable. Like ‘T’. Whoever she was or was turning into in that place, she’s morphed now. Now we’re in this different-smelling place with all our stuff from a past life. I unpack my stereo – one of those phony-old-fashioned deals. It plays tapes, CDs and records: the flickering trifecta of recorded music media.

Of the three, all I have left now is this one box of tapes, a fraction of my teen collection. If Jenny has eight apples and seven of them are stolen out of her car at a gas station, how many apples can she still listen to? One shoebox is it, and I’ve unearthed it. The top layer: Oingo Boingo, Nitzer Ebb, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, and a mixed tape from a high school buddy called Stroke the Pussy.

Things are coming back to me. Devo, Primus, Mr. Bungle. I touch the tapes one at a time, bob their rattling plastic cases in my hands. U2, The Rolling Stones, James Taylor. I test the hinges; some break off when I force them, glued shut by mysterious, age-browned liquids. Skankin Pickle, Peter Murphy, Cabaret Voltaire. Paper inserts sun-faded or wavy from being soaked and dried. KMFDM, Ministry, Vivaldi. Duke Ellington, The Clash. Part time capsule, part self-portrait. Sex Pistols, Nine Inch Nails. I start listening.

SHRIEKBACK | Oil and Gold

Oh my God, Brad and Tom are *beautiful* vampires. Stunning. Antonio, too, and even the puerile Kirsten. So beautiful I have suffered and cried with them six times in the theater, and dozens more at my house or at Rachael’s. We weep at Louis’ transformation; we ache to exist in his tragic reality. What makes Louis special is his interminable empathy for all the pain and all the suffering of the world, and of his kind. He is an all-seeing creature of the night. This I get. I don’t *want* him; I *am* him. Robust, Tolsoyan melancholy flourishes full-hearted in my poems. I live

inside my piano, finger its strings, learn to play Beethoven like River Phoenix in *Running on Empty*. I weep often. I am Keats' dejection, I am Poe's motherlessness, I am Whitman's war. I weep not because I have an intolerable life, but because I am lucky enough to see how intolerable the whole human world is, and how glorious. And because I see it, it is my duty to express it. Yes, me. You don't believe me? Fuck off. I'm fifteen and old enough to know.

I'll bleed for myself and for the world that can't bleed enough. Like Cash, I'll wear black for those who have no voice. I will be the conduit of pain, not hide from it. I will embrace disfigurement and suffering. I have this privilege.

SISTERS OF MERCY | Floodland & SIOUXSIE AND THE BANSHEES | Peepshow

Malia, my older sister and music umbilical cord, and I are in her red Toyota, Betty Pepper, on our way to Ground Zero, our favorite (the only?) goth-industrial club on the Front Range of Colorado. Sisters of Mercy are on the tape deck, Siouxsie on Side B. We sing along. I love her friends Dana and Kim for their black-rimmed beauty, for their maturity. They teach me how to act bold, feel powerful, boobs or no boobs. These two albums are the soundtrack of our drive there, our drive back, again next month, and again. Every time we go, I borrow an ID. My name is Natalie, my name is whatever. I smoke too many cloves, drink too many beers, pass out on the ride home. Kim says I look like a sleeping angel and I arch awake like a staked vampire, puke in Betty Pepper's back seat.

SINEAD O'CONNOR | The Lion and the Cobra

I too have walked through these huge landscapes of feeling, climbed hill after hill of joy that was anguish that was joy that was anguish that was joy. I live in an emotional state that pre-dates duality. It's all the same thing: love, destruction, compassion, rage, harmony, injustice. I've already learned nothing is fair and never will be, and so we're all screwed from the very beginning. But I know there's more to it—something to do with reveling, or is it wallowing. No, I am Zen, detached as shit. Bring it on. Sinéad is a rocket, a mountain, a waterfall.

I know that right now, I know all I'll ever need to know. I also know that when I'm older, I'll look back and laugh at how little I know now. My parents will turn out to be right, my sister will turn out to be right. I hate that fact, but know I can't change it. I am wise, you are wise. Everything will be just like you said it would be. I listen to this album and smell my old bedroom: dusty dried flowers, cheap incense, smoke – the smells of grafting part to part, soldering myself. The smell of that old contradiction: the impatience to change / the belief that not changing is ever even an option.

THE MOODY BLUES | A Question of Balance

Malia and I both absorbed nostalgia from Dad, I guess. His eyes watery sometimes as he sang along to “Melancholy Man.” Jubilant when the orchestra swelled up like a war was won. Mom's dreamy eyes, too, when Joan Baez sang. I learned from them this formula, borrowed their past through their music. They took us to see the Moody Blues when I was ten: our first rock concert.

Dad used to sing us Simon and Garfunkle. “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” I strain to picture the time of my parents' coming together, this almost tangible thing that preceded me but led to me. Harmony balanced against chaos, inside it and around it. It mattered only that I was there, that I had heard this, joined the Lonely Hearts Club. It was all bright and melancholic, it was bohemian in full-color, it was never meant for me but I found it anyway.

DAVID BOWIE | Changesbowie

It's October, 1995 and I'm standing in McNichol's Arena, practically vibrating with anticipation. It's David Bowie's Outside tour, with special guest Nine Inch Nails. I am passionate about Bowie, his incarnations, the way he reinvents himself to stay ahead of himself. There is truth in how he makes his image; he is the obviation of authenticity through malleability. Others, I think, do this well, but none so well as him. Then there's Trent, the other side of the David coin, in my world anyway. *I wanna fuck you like an animal* is a more dangerous strain of *You're a rock n' roll suicide...* Right now my long-time wish to marry them both and have a

spectacular three-way seems within reach; who ever thought they'd tour together?

Nine Inch Nails opens the show. Then the two bands do this amazing one-off-one-on thing to transition between the two sets. Suddenly there are both of them on stage together, playing "Reptile" and "Hurt," then playing "Hallo Spaceboy" and "Subterreaneans." David Bowie is in a white suit oh my god and he's singing and there's a red rose on the piano and oh my god he's so beautiful and they're singing together oh my god. I always thought Beatlemania was just a bunch of idiotic, sexually repressed girls, but now I think I understand and I am crying too because I love these men and their songs so much and all I want is to become the music and be consumed by it.

LEGENDARY PINK DOTS | The Maria Dimension

Louis is rolling around in the graveyard, moaning, having just swallowed blood from Lestat's wrist. Lestat tells him, "Pay no attention. You're only dying. It happens to us all." *I know exactly what he means!* The moonlight simplifies and flattens. Death is a lovely theory.

My little white cat Pearl is hit by a car. Before that, Rachael's little white dog Oscar is hit by a car. I watch them both die. I see them both burst, the boundary of the body and the world suddenly such a delicate, inflexible thing. No room for error, no room to live with a dent in your skull or your guts halfway in, halfway out. Impact is one word for this. But this is not the death aesthetic. This is blood that's more brown than red, with chunks of gore and gravel in it, and snot all over my face from crying. This is way too much violence and not enough violin glissandos. Too much silence, not enough LPD.

My grandfather dies, too, in Missouri. I am fourteen. I stay home with my sister for school, while Mom and Dad go to the funeral. I take acid and smoke cloves and meditate on the voice of Edward Kaspell who is a genius and nothing about this is ironic to me.

I take Brady to see them at the Ogden, 2006. I could see what he saw: Edward looking washed up in a bathrobe, sounding tired, music that had been made of brilliant deviations worn down to weary ramblings. All the times before that, with Malia in tiny,

sweaty, smoke-filled places, they were truly gods. When I listened and watched closely, I was a poem. I'll never see them again.

MINISTRY | Twitch

My husband and I are going to see a new documentary called *Fix*. It's mostly about Ministry. The crowd in the Riverview Theater is a hundred or more couples much like us: thirty- or forty-something former punks, goths and rockers. In adulthood you know us only by our off-black tattoos and Doc Martens. A ratty Tool concert t-shirt, a lip ring, a leather cuff. We're all gathered for the promise of *NEVER BEFORE SEEN!* footage and interviews, of rock-induced destruction and hysteria.

Trent Reznor has cut his hair and put on weight. He looks over it, well-adjusted. Rock was supposed to be this larger than life thing, Reznor says in *Fix*, and Al was the real thing. Alien Jourgensen, he means. Whatever else is real or not real, aging is real. All these men (plus one woman: Siouxsie) who were supposed to be supernatural beings show up on screen with wrinkles and thinning hair. Their minds and words are muddled from years of doping and partying like it's 1999. Which it was, thirteen years ago. Past Jen covers her face with embarrassment. Present Jen shrugs; she's known the stupid punch line all along.

Here's Ministry backstage, drunk and strung out past all realms of sanity. Al swinging his cock around, thrusting it into the cavity of a whole roasted chicken. Al deconstructing into a paranoid fit, tearing apart a room to find his lucky talisman. Past Jen savors his annihilation. Present Jen is sad for them. Sad for Al's thinning dreadlocks and heroin-fertilized egomania, for all of the bodies and brains of these feeble puppets who thought they were hands.

And all the aging rockers sing, *Doo do-doo do-doo do-do-doo-dooo*. This is what happens when one survives, when he doesn't collapse into glorious rock n' roll suicide: he becomes a deluded junky, becomes commercial, becomes old. Laughs at the crowds of moshers, his reverent disciples. Despises them, even, for their genuflection. Rock makes immortality possible, but only in death. Short of that, there's only calming down. It's the one way to outlive every kind of excess. I know as adults we should live responsibly

and seek balance. But I can't stand to watch this loss of extremism, this ultimate grotesquery of a sane and normal life.

THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS | Flood

I cheat on my misery every so often. I find the Truth, then occasionally chose to ignore it in favor of pleasure. Humans are like this. America is like this. So much of this place is so bright so clean so amusing, but I'm singing along, wondering *What was it I was supposed to remember?*

ECHO AND THE BUNNYMEN | Ocean Rain & BAUHAUS mix

Eleven is wistful for the glory of seven, ditches some of the stuffed animals but cries about it. Twelve loves L.M. Montgomery and Diane Fossey, still plays with Barbies, crops their plugs of hair into mohawks and food-dyes it pink, puts tiny jump rings in their noses. Thirteen finds hippie clothes and the Doors, the Violent Femmes, green hair and pot. Fourteen wears black, builds fairy villages in the back yard, plays sinister new varieties of make-believe. Fifteen falls in love, takes acid and plays in the park.

I used to volunteer every month at the historic Avery House, giving tours of the upper rooms, the piano parlor at Christmastime. My friend Ruth and I opened the upstairs shades, and we imagined we heard the ghost of Sarah Avery rustling her skirts on the dark oak stairs. I imagined I was a Victorian girl. Now my room is a twisted carnival. There's my neglected hamster, my posters of Snoopy, of The Beatles, mountain gorillas, Maxfield Parish, Robert Smith, and H.R. Geiger's fields of dead babies and women in erotic machines.

I travel to Germany to France to Italy, wander in castles and catacombs. I dream in stone. I fill my journal with gothic arches and rhymed verses. I listen to my tapes, ignore my family, try to be alone at all times. The music builds what I see. Old wars underneath modern ones. Destruction popping through the cracks of life. The shame of an entire nation, the fall of whole empires. There's something churning and shimmering in these violences, some ancient coelacanth living in the deep ocean. It has a beating heart, it has sex parts, it has a brain. It stirs us. We stoop to scoop it

up, or we run away. Beggars in the Acropolis, art on the Berlin Wall.

EINSTURZENDE NEUBAUTEN | Ende Neu

Vampires do not suffer from gastrointestinal distress or acne, menstrual periods or skin fungus. They are unblemishable except by stakes through the heart or bad sunburns. So where does the ugliness go? The kings of underground German industrial taught me where it turns into art. I needed more noise in my diet. I still do. It's the only way to remember I'm demanding a rarer steak on the Titanic. "New Ending," the title track means. Cycles and circles and circles again. My sister's eyes, blue eyes in gray stone, a black-and-white photo with a red licorice smile. The best concert of my life. Blixa Bargeld a congenial, wild-eyed deity, crazed inventor of sounds, deformed deus ex machine, singing in a suit, flirting with his front row congregants. Neubauten the new end feels like memory, sounds like the future today.

REPEAT>>

I'm still grabbing tapes, typing in my corner of the bedroom, looking out the window at the street I live on, this town, this year. So many windows I've looked out of! So many exclamation points! It's small and cold here. I'll continue to raise the dead and the sleeping, resurrect a few more buried songs, let them feed again on my brains. I am cursed by too much traveling, can think about nothing else. I wake up to a feeling that I need to be getting back but don't know where that is. I have twenty-seven tapes to go, nostalgia to burn. I guess the past, here, is as good a place as any to live for now. When the tape stops, I'll drop a crumb.