

## Staging the Narrative

A study on the interplay of performance and narrative in  
La Dispute's album Wildlife

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## Abstract

Throughout this thesis, I will look at the concept album as a discursive genre with a focus on La Dispute's second full-length album *Wildlife*, released in 2011. By engaging with the narrative and the performance of *Wildlife*, I will analyze and discuss aspects that are germane to the musical genre of post-hardcore, which will aim to answer the following research question: **How do authenticity and performativity inform the listener's response to the interplay of narrative and performance in La Dispute's concept album *Wildlife*?**

Part one of this thesis will focus on the theoretical framework I base my discussion on. The terms "performance" and "narrative" will be thoroughly examined, and my findings will support the second part, where I use the method of close reading and close listening to analyze the album and answer the research question. The analysis follows the same structure as the album, which is divided into four parts, all of which discuss separate themes and events that tie together with an overarching narrative.

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## Introduction

When Bob Dylan was given the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016 “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” opinion was divided on whether or not a musician should be eligible to win a literary award (Sisario et al., 2016). Although Bob Dylan is first and foremost known for his music, and not his poetry, it is his songwriting that lies the foundation of his success. His voice is distinct, yes, but not one that would harbor the same recognition were it not for his lyrical contents. The fact that he won the Nobel Prize in Literature shows that the literariness of music is an ongoing discussion in academic and elitist circles.

The bardic tradition has been around for millennia, so storytelling in music is nothing new, but it is interesting regardless to see how music and storytelling can combine to become greater than the sum of their parts. A song can be great without good lyrics, but can lyrics be great without good music? And if lyrics are great without the music, is it not just a poem? The distinction lies in the delivery, and while poetry can of course be performed on a stage, it is meant to be read and consumed by a reader, while a song is performed and then consumed by a listener. A poem is *internalized*, while music is *external* (Eckstein, 2010, p. 10). The same goes with a novel – the most comprehensive of storytelling devices. You could add music – or a soundtrack – to an audiobook, but it would still be considered a novel, and not a 30-hour-long spoken word album. Yet, great stories can be delivered through music, and while the music might be inaccessible and unintriguing to the masses, the story can be as relatable and interesting as any famous book.

Like any art form, different types of music appeal to different people from different backgrounds. While “low arts” would encompass popular and underground music in any genre, the “high arts” contain operatic and classical works. What marks this divide? While the lines get blurrier with each passing day, with typically underground bands playing in opera houses and orchestras doing their best to reach out to the people, one can still claim that the crowds at a punk rock show and an opera are vastly different. While these particular forms of artistic expression seem different, the contents are more similar than we like to admit. The ballad is a great example of a genre that is inherently rural, and therefore traditionally of the low arts, but one that also has gained momentum in the high arts during the centuries through the ballad opera. This has in turn indirectly evolved into the modern-day musical

(Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018), a stage play that continues to divide opinion and draws audiences from both the lower-, middle- and upper classes. My point is that even though the opera and theater are the places where one would usually be able to consume larger narratives set to music, there are many examples of how stories get told in genres that do not require a stage presence. Frank Zappa, The Beatles, and Pink Floyd are often cited as the inventors, refiners, and perfectors of the concept album, but while *Freak Out!*, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *The Wall* are iconic in their own rights, there are some lesser-known and acknowledged musicians that have taken elements from ballads, poetry, punk, opera, rap, and short stories and created music that allows music in combination with poetry to become greater than the sum of its parts.

One band that this may apply to is La Dispute. The American post-hardcore band has gained widespread recognition for their emotive music and lyrics, and although they are yet to break into the mainstream, their four full-length albums have been consistently well received by fans and critics alike (Shteamer, 2019). La Dispute consists of Jordan Dreyer on vocals, his cousin Bradley Vander Lugt on drums, Chad Morgan-Sterenberg and Corey Stroffolino<sup>1</sup> on guitars, and Adam Vass on bass. While the band is most often cited as being a 'post-hardcore' act, a genre which I will elaborate on soon, Dreyer's vocals have taken a queue from the poetic performance-art 'spoken word'. The plaintive and direct delivery of the lyrics, combined with the rough and hard-hitting music, create an intriguing medium for narrative expression and reflection, and as their friend and collaborator Will Yip has stated: "The lyrics are an instrument with this band" (Coffey, 2015). But how does that work in practice?

Throughout this thesis, I will look at the concept album as a discursive genre with a focus on La Dispute's second full-length album *Wildlife*, released in 2011. By engaging with the narrative and the performance of *Wildlife*, I will analyze and discuss aspects that are germane to the musical genre of post-hardcore, which will aim to answer the following research question: **How do authenticity and performativity inform the listener's response to the interplay of narrative and performance in La Dispute's concept album *Wildlife*?** Part one of this thesis will focus on the theoretical framework I base my discussion on. The terms "performance" and "narrative" will be thoroughly examined, and my findings will

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<sup>1</sup> Corey Stroffolino replaced long-time guitarist and founding member Kevin Whittemore in 2014, who left the band shortly after recording their third album *Rooms of the House*.



support the second part, where I use the method of close reading and close listening to analyze the album and answer the research question.

To answer the research question, there are a set of analytical questions that must be addressed. How is the narrative in *Wildlife* structured? What are the elements and features that inform the narrative? What emotions are portrayed in the lyrics, and how are they delivered in the vocal performance? How does the instrumentation and vocal delivery reflect the narrative? Are the lyrics poetic or prosaic, and how does this inform the narrative and the performance? Does the use of different perspectives, implied voices, and personas strengthen the narrative, and how does this aspect manifest in the lyrics? What elements in the performance and narrative strengthen the sense of authenticity?

My primary sources will be the album's lyrics as they appear on the page in the booklet following the CD-copy, the songs as they appear on Spotify, and an interview Jordan Dreyer did in the wake of the album's release. This interview was conducted and edited by one of the album's producers and engineers Joseph Pedulla (2012), is called "Conversations", and can be enjoyed in its entirety on La Dispute's Bandcamp-page. As I cite this source multiple times in my analysis, there will be timestamps added in the citation, as the entire interview is 1 hour and 20 minutes long. I have also scanned the booklet from the CD, and the pages as they appear there have been added to the beginning of each song's analysis to provide visualization for the reader.

Before this thesis begins, however, I will provide some context in terms of the musical genre and use this as a segue into the theory that is relevant in terms of narrative and performance.

## Musical Genre

Although it is nice to be able to name a genre when someone asks what that band you have been talking obsessively about for the last few hours sounds like, the categorization of music is a tricky path to go down. Not only are musical genres polyvalent and fluid (Middleton, 2000, p. 232), the very discussion of what genre any given band belongs to can spark animosity as fans, bands, labels, and radio stations often have completely different views on how to categorize the sound. There is a jungle of genres and sub-genres, and although La Dispute's musical roots are in the hardcore punk-scene, this says little of what the band actually sounds like. As I have mentioned, La Dispute is often cited as a post-hardcore band,

with emo and spoken word being genres that pop up when trying to be more specific, but what does that mean?

As the name suggests, post-hardcore is an offshoot of the faster and simpler genre commonly known as hardcore or hardcore punk. While the instrumentation of post-hardcore bands tends to be the same as hardcore bands, with fast drums, heavy guitars and bass, and rough and often screaming vocals, post-hardcore bands create less rigid and often more complex songs than hardcore bands. Or as Wikipedia (2023) describes it: “Post-hardcore is a punk rock music genre that maintains the aggression and intensity of hardcore punk but emphasizes a greater degree of creative expression”. The genre is in other words hard to pin down, as this definition enables bands to explore a myriad of sounds and expressions. It feels more like one of those genres where you place rock bands that are difficult to place in a more generic category, and while there are post-hardcore bands that have gained mainstream appeal, I would argue that the music you place in this genre is often distorted and complex for the sake of being different and authentic. It is music created by the artist and for the artist, and should this grant you mainstream appeal and a solid income, then that is a pleasant side effect rather than a motivation in itself.

This brings us to the Do-It-Yourself culture that remains an intrinsic part of most alternative rock-genres. The DIY-culture in music is first and foremost about making things happen without outside interference. You set up your own shows, distribute your own music, write your own songs, create your own merchandise et cetera.

“An endearing part of DIY is doing things within a community. This involves doing things for other people in your own way. Then there’s the marketable way: Jumping on what everybody wants at a given moment. The problem is, what people want at a given moment is always subject to change. Working hard for yourself or others isn’t”. (Grubbs, 2008, pp. 325-326)

Based on this notion, it is easy to conclude that the sense of authenticity – the feeling that the music comes from a necessity for expression rather than a want for fame and fortune – is an integral part of how music in this scene is received by the invested audience. And although the labels that distribute much of the music we get from this scene, like Epitaph, Bridge9, Deathwish, and No Sleep hold considerable power in terms of sales and appeal, they are more concerned with artistic expression and freedom than what corporate labels like Sony,

Universal, and Warner are likely to allow, as their main motivation will to a much larger degree be money. The fact that the independent labels that I have mentioned are all founded and run by zealots and artists themselves would back up this notion.

While post-hardcore is the genre most typically attributed to La Dispute, I do want to elaborate on emo- and spoken-word music as well, as I see them as important to two major aspects of La Dispute's performance: sincerity and poetry. Emo is a heavily stereotyped and misunderstood genre, which is easy to both make fun of and write off as the primary audience in its heyday was anxiety-ridden teenagers. Emo, or emocore, has its roots in punk rock as well, but while punk tends to be more abrasive and angry, emo sought to describe personal and individual problems (Greenwald, 2003, p. 3), which, of course, is everything when you are a teenager. The main argument against La Dispute being an emo-band is that their music is a bit too experimental to be labeled as such, yet when you look at the contents of their lyrics, it is nothing if not emotional.

Although spoken word is not primarily a music genre, Dreyer's vocals are performed in a way that is neither singing nor screaming, and with narrative as a central part of the performance, the delivery is more akin to reciting a series of poems than singing a song.

“Spoken word poetry refers to any kind of poetry recited out loud: hip-hop, jazz poetry, poetry slams, traditional poetry reading. Perhaps its Ur form is performance poetry [which] are explicitly written to be performed out loud; they tend to have a visceral spontaneity, a highly vocal, in-your-face-quality. They are not meant to be read on the page or sung. They are decidedly spoken” (Hirsch, 2014, pp. 605-606).

With Edward Hirsch's definition at hand, it is not easy to conclude whether or not La Dispute belongs in this genre. Dreyer's vocals are no doubt written to be performed out loud, but the line between speaking and singing is blurred in quite a few of their songs. Although this is something that will be elaborated on in part two of this thesis, it is important to notice that while *Wildlife* is not a spoken word-act per se, it does lend a few tricks from this realm, knowingly or not. As Dreyer has stated himself: “...I can't, like, sing. In that way it's kind of poetry, and it's kind of hip hop. That is a longstanding joke of ours [...] that we're a rap-rock band” (Shteamer, 2019).

It is in any case obvious that La Dispute has taken inspiration from several people, bands, and genres, and as Dreyer started out as a writer rather than a musician (DeLapp,

2012), this interplay is a vital part of what makes La Dispute stand out in the vast jungle of musical expressions. It is this interplay that lays the foundation of this thesis. In the following pages, I will elaborate on these thoughts and statements. I will begin with a deep dive into the performance aspect, where I will discuss performativity, poetry, sincerity, and authenticity, before I dive into narrative theory, and the concept album as a discursive genre, in order to give the proper context and terminology that will help me answer my research question.

## Part 1 – Theory

As I aim to look at the interplay between narrative and performance, both sides of this coin must be addressed. While I am of the opinion that the lyrics in *Wildlife* are worth engaging with on the page, I am under no illusion that I would have engaged with its narrative without the performance aspect, but I am also aware that I would never have engaged with the music in such an intricate way without the text. As I am not a trained musician, nor a musicologist, any analysis of the music will steer away from musical theory. I will however use my ears, describe what I hear, and try to formulate to the best of my ability how the instrumentation, vocalization, and structure of the songs informs – and is informed by – the narrative. My first route of action is to understand the theoretical foundations of the listener's response to the performance.

### Performance

As I have already established, the performance in *Wildlife* is one rooted in an emotive and in-your-face DIY-culture with something to say – which means that these aspects should function as criteria for any scrutiny. Have La Dispute created an album that reflects the ethos of their post-hardcore roots? To answer this, a certain set of terms and theories needs to be established. Without the music, there is no performance, so first of all, I will discuss a theoretic foundation that allows me to discuss this without going deep into music theory. In other words: I will discuss the music in the light of performativity, and the interaction between the music and the audience, which will help me discover what the music and lyrics *do* to the listener. Moving on, I will address the terms sincerity and authenticity, and discuss why these terms are vital to understanding how *Wildlife* moves the listener. Lastly, I will look at the poetic aspect to see how Dreyer's poetic performance relates to the narrative and musical performance.

## Performativity

“If the song is striking enough, then you can really deliver the story” – Frank Ocean.  
(Singh, 2022)

While it was the narrative of *Wildlife* that made me explore La Dispute on a deeper level, it was the music that grabbed me first. Even before I started reading the lyrics and understanding what Dreyer tried to convey in both *Somewhere at the Bottom of the River Between Vega and Altair* (2008) and *Wildlife*, I liked it more simply because the performance, both in terms of music and vocals, made it obvious that there was *something* the vocalist just had to get off his chest. I did not know what or why, but I understood that it was important, and that was appealing enough in itself. What are the mechanisms at work here? How are feelings conveyed musically? How does the listener understand the emotions being conveyed before knowing the meaning of the words? What does La Dispute attempt to do to the listener, and do they succeed?

One crucial term to address is ‘performativity’. While the term stems from linguistic studies and refers to a word’s ability to create extra-semiotic meaning, such as christening a ship, or marrying a couple, it has been slowly introduced to music studies (Davidson, 2014; Eckstein, 2010, p. 31). Its relevance in this thesis is in other words tied to the concept of music containing and creating meaning outside of itself, which can be seen in an audience’s response to a performance. As this thesis is mainly about song lyrics as both a written and performed concept, Lars Eckstein has provided a vital theoretical framework in his book *Reading Song Lyrics*, in which he states that “the performativity of lyrics [...] is firmly embedded in the larger frames of performance of which both performers and audiences have a tacit understanding, and what lyrics ‘do’ may range considerably according to particular performing conventions” (2010, p. 37).

As my taste in music is leaning towards guitar, drum, and bass-driven rock music (although with many, many exceptions), I am much more responsive to La Dispute’s musical work (and therefore narrative work) than someone whose taste is steered towards electronic dance music, opera, country, or hip hop. I am sure there are albums and stage performances that tell deeply moving stories to which I could relate, but that I will never enjoy in this same way simply because the performance is not to my taste. But to counter my own point, I would be amiss not to point out that the concept of ‘acquired taste’ exists. Just like I at some point

learned to like certain post-hardcore acts, I can also learn to like country artists by engaging the music and culture on a deeper level, and through prolonged exposure. While this idea is important to the aspect of audience reception and participation, it is not important in the sense that I want to discover why *someone* – and not everyone – relates to the story through the music.

Another question that I wish to discuss is whether performativity and sincerity are contradicting terms. While I will address the concepts of sincerity and authenticity further in a bit, I want to briefly discuss the term ‘performative’ as an antonym to these concepts. While ‘commercial’ is a term previously used to oppose ‘authenticity’ (Moore, 2002, p. 211), the word ‘performative’ could also be valid in that sense. As a performance is in nature a performative endeavor, it is easy to draw the conclusion that all performances are, at least to a certain extent, ‘fake’, or ‘staged’, and therefore ‘inauthentic’. Even if the performance involves a performer who tells his or her life story, one can question the performer’s intentions. Is he or she telling it to spark sympathy? Or maybe the person sees a way to profit from past trauma? Social media is filled with performative behavior, “an action taken specifically with an audience in mind, to elicit a response or reaction” (Hartnett, 2016), and so we are accustomed to people faking sincerity, provoking emotions, and staging their problems as something important to everyone. In terms of the musical performance, it might therefore not be a stretch to apply such negative connotations and implications to La Dispute, but it is important to note that as music *is* a performance, applying such a rigid vocabulary would hold all performance to an impossible standard. To be able to discuss these questions and conundrums at all, one must differentiate between a performance *being* authentic and being perceived as such.

There might be a fine line between performativity and inauthenticity, but there is no such thing as music that is non-performative. Music resonates with people in different ways, and while some might steer away from certain performances because it seems inauthentic, others will be drawn to them because they are ‘cool’, ‘unique’, ‘virtuosic’, or maybe ‘funny’. Were this thesis to discuss work by heavy metal or prog rock acts, such as Kiss, Iron Maiden, or Tool to name a few, these terms would be germane in the sense that they inform our response to their performances, but as I will discuss music that is aiming to be more “grounded”, the terms sincerity and authenticity work together with performativity as a part of the performance, rather than stand in opposition.

## Sincerity and Authenticity

A good friend of mine once said about a band that I like that “they sound cool and all, but the music is just soulless”. This quote has stuck with me, and while I wholeheartedly disagreed with his statement, I have tended to use this same phrasing when speaking of music that I do not like, but I cannot place a finger as to why that is the case. To me, more often than not, this boils down to a sense of sincerity and authenticity – do the performers believe in what they do? I struggle with TV shows like *The Voice* or *X-Factor* because the performers, while singing cover songs in front of crying judges, do not seem to bring anything of value to the table. Of course, these are talented performers who are trying to make a name for themselves in a rough and cold business, and who deserve some sympathy, but the concepts they partake in feel generic, and – if I dare say it – soulless.

I recognize that this is subjective, which is why I share my subjective feelings, but that does not mean that sincerity and authenticity play any less part in the discourse around people’s perceptions and relationship with music. Although he does not speak of sincerity as a musical concept, Allan Moore is one scholar who has spoken of the value of authenticity in music, pointing out that authenticity is tied to an artist’s ability to speak the truth about themselves, others, and/or the culture they represent. In his article *Authenticity as authentication*, he proposed a tripartite typology based on asking *who* rather than *what* is being authenticated. This typology is helpful as a categorization of authenticity as it allows one to look at any song and grant it some form of authentic virtue, depending on whether it is the performer, the audience, or an absent other who is being authenticated. His conclusion is that “academic consideration of authenticity should shift from consideration of the intention of the various originators towards the activities of various perceivers, and focus on the reason they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic” (2002, p. 221).

If I was to utilize this typology, I would place La Dispute in what Moore calls “first person authenticity”, or *authenticity of expression*, which “arises when an originator succeeds in conveying that his utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience” (2002, p. 214). This is not easily accomplished on an album. While music is performance, a studio album is most often constructed with a series of takes that are patched together to create a unified whole. The artist can strive for perfection, which will come at the expense of authenticity, as a live recording will inevitably contain some flaws. The result exists to move the listener in the

moment of consumption, however (Frith, 1998, p. 211), meaning that an album, no matter how artificial its origins were, can still be perceived as authentic and sincere by a listener.

But, as Håvard Haugland Bamle points out in his article *Indie-Folk Music and the Quest for Personal Authenticity* (2023), Moore's conclusion that authenticity is ascribed rather than inscribed, undermines the philosophical root of the word. The question then is whether music can only give the impression of being authentic (as Moore suggests), or whether it can *be* authentic (as Bamle suggests). When analyzing La Dispute, I will give credence to this question by looking at the parts of the narrative which are either based on reality or made up. By following Bamle's example, I would like to address that it is not just our impression of the music that informs whether this work is authentic, but also the sincerity behind the creation of the album and its lyrics.

In the liner notes of *Wildlife*, it is stated that "no artificial reverb was used on this record", showing that La Dispute is very much concerned with authenticity, as they make a point of using their surroundings at the time of recording to create a more authentic sound than what can be created through electronic gadgets and computers. Another aspect that might reinforce the sense of authenticity is in the booklet, where the handwritten text provides a visualization of the vocals, in which Dreyer explicitly says that he is writing notes to elaborate on the stories told. This established a meta-writing discourse, which further strengthens the sense of authenticity, as it blurs the line between what is real and what is made up; what is *I* and what is *persona*.

The term *persona* derives from the word for a mask or a false face worn by actors, but has become a term for the person who speaks in a poem or other literature in literary jargon (Cuddon & Habib, 2014, p. 529). *Persona* as a subject is elaborated on in Alan Moore's *Song Means*, where he distinguishes the identity of the singing voice in three different levels: Performer, persona, and protagonist (2012, p. 181). As I will elaborate on when I discuss narrative theory, the distinction between these three is unclear in *Wildlife*. Does this enforce the authenticity of the album? The questions arise as it is apparent that much of the album's contents are closely related to Dreyer's own experiences, yet he does not state that he is the protagonist of the album, and he is consistent in referring to the protagonist as either "the narrator" or "the author" in *Conversations* (Pedulla, 2012). Moore proposes three questions (2012, p. 182) which will be germane as I discuss the album, and help determine the degree of authenticity of the plot. Does the persona appear to be *realistic* or overtly *fictional*? Is the



situation described *realistic* or *fictional*? And is the singer personally *involved* in the situation described, or acting as an *observer*?

While the musical aspect of *Wildlife* can and should be scrutinized with regard to sincerity and authenticity, would it not be more fruitful to ascertain a sense of sincerity by looking at its lyrical contents? Lionel Trilling (1972) is one scholar who has written extensively on sincerity and authenticity in literature, looking at both how academic and dramatic writers have approached the topic. Donald Davie, as quoted in Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, states that "a poem in which the *I* stands immediately and unequivocally for the author is at the present time held to be essentially and necessarily superior to a poem in which the *I* stands not for the author but for a *persona* of the author's". Should one accept this quote as fact (Which Trilling does not), the lyrical quality of *Wildlife* would hinge on the authenticity of the story, and whether the story is a life lived by Jordan Dreyer himself. This would, of course, be an absurd conclusion, as art need not be autobiographical to be sincere, but with regards to *Wildlife*, the real events that Dreyer recount does indeed strengthen the story, as the added realism anchors the story in a way that makes the listener think that "if it happened to them, it could happen to me".

Although these concepts will help me address whether *Wildlife* can be seen as authentic or not, there are more aspects to the performance that needs to be addressed. As I seek to understand how song lyrics are memorable and enjoyable in themselves, I need to address *how* they are constructed and performed.

## Poetry

"When analyzing musico-poetic works it can be tempting to view the poetry and music as separate entities which happen to exist in the same piece, focusing too heavily on the influence of one or the other in the overall narrative. Each of these two elements bring unique information to the story and combine to create a full image of the narrative. These two pieces therefore need to be viewed as a cohesive whole in order to grasp the full meaning of the song cycle." (Dempsey, 2020, p. 3)

I am of the opinion that there is nothing quite as cathartic as watching a live performance where you and the audience know every word being sung or yelled from the stage, and being able to sing along from the top of your lungs. While this aspect is by no means exclusive to

La Dispute and post-hardcore music, it is an intrinsic part of the band and genre's appeal. While La Dispute and Dreyer have written narratives and phrases that are delivered through long and often complex phrases, they are written in a way that makes it possible for the audience to yell along. This is down to the poetic aspect of the lyrics, and while some songs are more direct and prosaic, others are more poetical with recurring use of prosody and figurative language. The rhythm of the music and the lyrics goes hand in hand throughout *Wildlife*, which means that in order to understand how the performance informs the narrative, one must understand how poetry informs the performance.

As I read the lyrics on the page, the booklet functions like a libretto in an opera, where I am informed of the narrative structures of the songs as they appear on the page. While 'libretto' is Italian for 'booklet', it is a term that is more closely related to music than its English translation and is therefore an appropriate term in this context. The libretto, then, is a source for scansion and close reading in a way that is more difficult to do if one is bound to listen to the words rather than read them. Although one can simply find the lyrics online, the libretto does come with some additional information, which I will come back to as I discuss the album's structure.

As will be made clear in the analysis, Dreyer has made good use of his past work as a poetic writer, and there are multiple examples of both prosody and figurative language in the songs. Although that is the case with most music, the structure of these songs looks more like lyric or poetic sequences, rather than songs consisting of verse, chorus, bridge, and so on. This means that the poetic aspect is an important part of the performance not just because it shows off Dreyer's ability to mix a narrative with poetry, but because it informs the structure of the songs, which asks the listener to engage with the interplay of music and lyrics on a deeper level. The parts of the analysis that discusses the poetic aspect of the lyrics draw on terminology found in *An Introduction to Poetry* (2010) by X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, and *A Prosody Handbook* (1965) by Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum.

## Narrative

It is not enough to look at the words on the page as poetry, however, as I aim to show how the overarching narrative and plot are essential to our appreciation of the performance in *Wildlife*. Although each song tells its own story, *Wildlife* is a cohesive and unified album that must be approached as a coherent unit. In the following pages, I will address narrative theory to create

a foundation for my analysis of the album's narrative. I will discuss a few different approaches to the field, look at how it informs my close reading, and how others have applied it to song lyrics before me. Before I do that, however, I need to address the discursive genre, which enables coherent narratives to coexist in multiple songs.

### **The Concept Album**

Although the very existence of concept albums might seem superfluous in the age of streaming, the accessibility services such as Spotify, Tidal, YouTube, and Soundcloud provides makes the concept of categorizing songs around a unified theme or narrative as applicable as ever. By using her artistic authority, Adele ensured that her album *30* would be consumed in its intended order by making Spotify remove a default setting that saw albums being shuffled when the listener pressed the play button, stating that “our art tells a story, and our stories should be listened to as we intended” (Cills, 2021). It is in other words not just the classic prog-acts of the 70s who are concerned with the way listeners consume an artist's labor. On top of that, vinyl records have gone through a renaissance in recent years (Caulfield, 2023), showing that there is a considerable market for the consumption of music as not just sound, but a complete piece of work consisting of songs, images, lyrics, and liner notes.

The concept album as we know it today was popularized in the 1960s and 1970s (Merlini, 2020) with acts such as Yes, Frank Zappa, The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Beach Boys, The Who, and Jethro Tull coming readily to mind. However, one of the earliest examples of an album whose songs revolve around a unified narrative can be traced back to 1940 with Woodie Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*. Going even further back, one can cite song cycles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – where romantic poems were set to piano melodies, forming a chronological narrative – as an early prototype for the concept (PopMatters Staff, 2014; Sturges, 2009). Despite all this, and even though most people with an interest in music have a tacit understanding of what a concept album is, a concrete and tangible definition is not as easily obtained as one might think.

While the name ‘concept album’ is descriptive enough for one to think that it needs no further definition – a concept album is an album where the songs are unified by a concept – there are some issues to address, but in Roy Shuker's *Popular Music: The Key Concepts* (2017) the concept album is concisely defined:

“Concept albums, which include rock operas, are unified by a theme, which can be instrumental, compositional, narrative, or lyrical. In this form, the album changed from a collection of heterogenous songs into a narrative work with a single theme, in which individual songs segue into one another”.

While this definition is clear, some questions must be asked. To what degree must each song touch upon the same narrative theme? Is it enough to have a loose concept, in which there is a coherency in musical style and topics, but there is no unified plot to guide the listener from one song to the next? Must the songs actually segue into one another musically?

By asking these questions, I touch upon the subjectivity of the discourse. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) by The Beatles is a good example, as there is no concrete plot to bind each song together. There is however a rough narrative in which the album is a fictive live performance by an imaginary band. Whether this is enough to back up the notion that this is indeed a concept album depends on whom you ask, and John Lennon himself was hesitant in calling it a concept album, as “any song could be on any other album” (Krerowicz, 2013). But that does not stop the album from being viewed as one of, if not the most important and famous concept albums of all time.

In any case, one might be well served by speaking of concept albums as a spectrum based on the degree narratives or themes are manifested in the music. Some albums have a clear musical concept, with songs gliding seamlessly into each other, but without a clearly defined narrative. Mew and the Glass Handed Kites (2005) is a prime example of this. The previously mentioned *Sgt. Pepper's* would define another point on the axis. *Wildlife* on the other hand, would, as I will expand on in part two, fit firmly into what I would categorize as a concept album in its most concrete form, where each song is informed by a set narrative, where there is a main character, where songs are connected by intertextual references, and where the music guides the listener from one story to the next.

## **Narrative Theory**

“My central contention is that *narrative* is a concept that can enhance understanding of human communication and action wherever those phenomena occur. To view discourse and action as occurring within “the human story” will allow us to account for human behavior in ways that are not possible using the theories and methods of the

social sciences, especially those social sciences that attempt to approximate the paradigm of the natural sciences” (Fisher, 1989, p. 20).

Narrative theory is a concept that most of us partake in on a daily basis, knowingly or not. Through our interactions with books, movies, news, and conversations, we encounter and discuss narratives, so “narrative, in this sense, is what results from the effort to make real or imagined events and objects meaningful in relation to one another” (Puckett, 2016, pp. 1-2). As I continue, I will discuss a multitude of approaches to the concept as a form of literary critique, and use my findings to gain a broader understanding of what makes the narrative in *Wildlife* potent enough to lift the musical performance. The first course of action, however, is to define what a narrative is, and although the term is easy enough to define on the surface level, there are disparate voices when it comes to vocabulary and what aspects to emphasize.

The primary scholar I wish to address is Sonja K. Foss. In her book *Rhetorical Criticism* (2009), Foss provided a guide for analysis with narrative theory as the foundation, noting that narratives might also occur in rhetoric that is less obviously narrative, like dreams, conversations, interviews, speeches, and paintings. First, one needs to clarify what a narrative is, which Foss states can be distinguished from other rhetorical forms by four characteristics: A minimum of two events, time and order, a causal relationship between events, and a unified subject. This is also the foundation of her analysis, and any artifact that meets the four criteria is suitable for narrative criticism. The analysis itself should contain two primary steps: You must identify the objective of the narrative and identify the features of the narrative. The objective of the narrative is the action it appears designed to perform, while its features are what contribute to the achievement of that objective. The features mentioned are setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, theme, and type of narrative (2009, pp. 308-314).

While this approach will allow me to dive into the structures of each song, and determine the extent of each song’s narrative aspects, I need to be a bit more specific as I discuss the album’s use of narration, which is where Mieke Bal comes in. Bal differentiates between three agents that function in a narrative: The narrator, the focalizer, and the actor. While the narrator is the one telling the story, the focalizer is the one witnessing it, and the actor is the person causing or undergoing an action (2009, pp. 18, 201). I will refer to the main character, the protagonist if you will, as *the narrator*. This is the person writing the letters and performing them as monologues. This is also the person who comments on the

stories that are told throughout. I will refer to the person whose story is told as *the focalizer*. The focalizer is written from both a first- and third-person perspective, depending on which song you look at, and overlaps with the narrator in certain songs. When the person performing the action is unrelated to the narrator or the focalizer however, I think it is more fruitful to use the term *character* rather than actor, as the term ‘actor’ could easily be misunderstood and mixed with the previous two terms.

By looking in the libretto, it is noticeable that there are two fonts used to frame the narrative: One in handwriting, and one in standard machine font. This aspect is important, as it provides a visualization of the different voices that appear throughout the album. It is however ambiguous whose voice is heard, and as there is just one vocalist and lyricist, this aspect is easy to miss without the libretto. There are however two direct references to this aspect in the text itself. First in *a Departure*, as Dreyer says, “I wrote some notes in the margins explaining it, the rest is in between lines or in the fine print” (2’ 24”), and in *a Broken Jar*, where he asks “So which voice is this then that I’ve been writing in? Is it my own or his? Has there ever been a difference between them at all? I don’t know” (0’ 47”).

Seeing as I want to understand how the narrative moves the listener at the time of listening, these terms and approaches do not suffice. If, as Walter Fisher has stated, “narrative is a concept that can enhance understanding of human communication and action”, I need to look deeper than just the narrative as it appears on the page, which is why I will look at how other scholars have approached narrative theory as a means to study song lyrics.

### **Narrative in Music**

While narrative theory is a concept seldom used in music studies, there are several examples of scholars who have applied it as a framework for the analysis of song lyrics. David Nicholls created a concise typology for categorizing pop music lyrics in a narrative theoretic framework, but his article *Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts* (2007) was quite thoroughly criticized by Quint Randle and Keith Evans, as well as by professor of musicology Keith Negus. The former criticized the outdatedness of the songs analyzed, as well as its slightly misleading title, as they prefer their lyrical analysis to focus on lyrics alone (2013, p. 130). The latter was slightly more precise in his verdict, proving how Nicholls is sloppy in his placement of *I Wanna Hold Your Hand* by The Beatles as a “non-narrative”-song. Negus prefers instead to view songs in a larger social and cultural

context, in which songs with seemingly little narrative can obtain a broader meaning (2012, p. 370).

Although I must agree that Nicholls's choice of lyrical examples might not be flawless, I do appreciate his concise typology, which proposed that there are five basic levels at which narrativity can operate in song lyrics. At the first level, there is no story in the lyrics, and no narrative discourse in the musical setting. In the second level, the lyrics contain elements of narrative discourse, but these are not reflected by the music. In the third level, the lyrics contain elements of narrative discourse, and these are reflected by the music. On the fourth level, both lyrics and music contain elements of narrative discourse, and though they might operate independently of each other, they work in relation to an overlying story. Music on the fifth level contains a complex narrative, which is rendered in multiple media, including lyrics, music, prose, and artwork (Nicholls, 2007, p. 301). While this typology is more helpful if one is analyzing and categorizing music by various artists, it could help me pinpoint the complexity of *Wildlife's* individual songs. While I would not hesitate to place the album at the fifth level, there are songs on the record which might fit in on another level when one takes the musical aspect into account.

Quint Randle and Keith Evans from Brigham Young University on the other hand created a typology for analyzing pop song lyrics using narrative theory and semiotics (2013). While they aimed to aid teachers and students understand songwriting pedagogy, they built their work around many of the same scholars and theories that are relevant to this thesis. Their typology is helpful, but I take more from their applied literature and theory than I do from their analysis of pop song lyrics. I am, like Nicholls, inclined to read lyrics in the context of the music, and not just as it stands on the page, as Randle and Evans proposed. Although the typology they created, which maps song lyrics in four bi-axial categories (2013, p. 135), is a good starting point for analysis, it does not allow me to study the text in a broader context, nor see how the lyrics tie together with the music. The road forward is in other words inspired by these articles and their propositions, but as this thesis will be more concerned with a single album and its merits, they are more relevant in terms of my approach rather than my conclusion.

Andrew Ward is another scholar whose work deals with narrative and pop music. In his dissertation *Popular Song and Narratology* (2019), he sought to explore how narrative affects, influences, and informs lyrics written for contemporary popular songs, and argued for a new typology that would act as a lens for the examination of song lyrics as a unique and

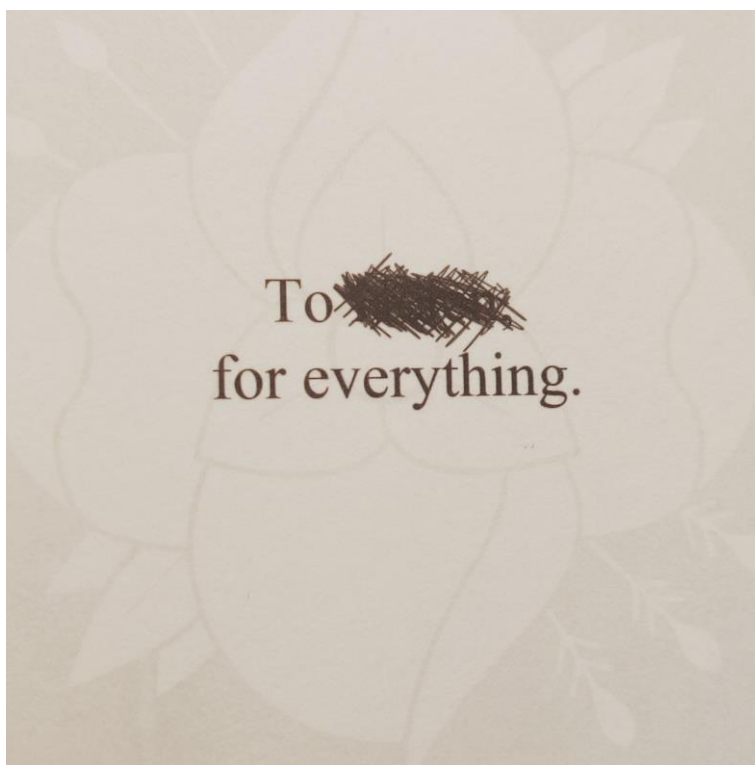
distinct literary form. While Ward's work focuses on pop music and the act of writing songs itself, he does propose two sub-questions that I find relevant (2019, pp. 19-20): Do popular songs adhere to linear beginning/middle/end (in a narrative sense), and does this create a dissonance between narrative and musical structure? And if there is dissonance, how can narrative operate within most common pop song structures? While these questions are irrelevant in the sense that no songs on *Wildlife* adhere to regular pop-song structures, I can rephrase them to fit my thesis. Do the lyrics on *Wildlife* adhere to a linear narrative structure, and does this create a dissonance between narrative and musical structure?

### **Album Structure**

To answer that question first: Yes, the lyrics of *Wildlife* are a linear narrative, which does not create a dissonance to the musical structure, but rather forge it. This also means that there is no simple way to categorize and divide the musical structures of the songs on *Wildlife*. While most of the music we hear on a daily basis consists of the basic structural elements of verse, chorus, and bridge, La Dispute follows their own path, where the story drives the music forward, without the interference that a "regular" structure might provide. This means that each song on *Wildlife* is integral to the overarching narrative, as they, by virtue of the concept album, all inform the story in one way or another. None of this is to say that La Dispute are unique in this regard, but it is important to know ahead of my analysis.

While there is little academic work done on La Dispute, Dr. Adrian M. Downey from Mount Saint Vincent University is the one scholar I have managed to find that has written about *Wildlife* explicitly. While his article is more interested in sadness in an educational context, its structure is modeled after the album, in much the same way as I intend to do. "*Wildlife* is a portrait of sadness, and it is often noted for its emotionally evocative lyrics which vividly address loss, coping, death, and hope" (2022, p. 75). These four themes can be attributed to the four distinct parts of the album, and each is introduced by a song in the form of a monologue (or letter) to which the following songs respond. Just as Downey and La Dispute have divided their works into these four categories, so shall I.





*Figure 1 - Inside of the CD-folder*

After a small instrumental introduction, the personal and intimate nature of the record is introduced with the words “To Scratched out, for everything!”. As one reads the inside of the CD-folder (see Figure 1), the words “scratched out” are replaced by a name that has been literally scratched out. Like a single acknowledgment, as is custom to write at the beginning of any book – to one’s wife, girlfriend, or family – La Dispute establishes that the following stories are dedicated to someone. The identity of this someone is left for the listener to decide, but when I look at my copy of the album cover at the right angle in a bright light, there is a faint name beneath the scribble: “To Helen, for everything”.

Throughout *Wildlife*, the entire narrative is in other words written as a letter to Helen, but her identity is not important beyond helping establish a sense of authenticity. Although it is unconfirmed whether Helen is a real person, and not just a character in their lyrical universe (Kill Your Stereo, 2013), it is the first indication that the album is based on the real-life experiences of Jordan Dreyer himself. Helen might also refer to Helen of Troy, with her name used as a placeholder for Dreyer’s former partner. Helen of Troy is regarded as the most beautiful woman in ancient Greece, with a beauty of divine quality (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). In a lyrical universe as poetical as this, I would not disregard the possibility.

## Part 2 – Analysis

In the following pages, you will read my analysis of *Wildlife*. While the analysis is based on the theoretical framework that I discussed in part one, the majority of ideas and statements are based on readings of the album's narrative and musical contents. It may not be a totally objective presentation of the contents, but it is an example of how one can engage with narrative in music. More importantly, it is an inquiry into how the musical and narrative aspects interact. The method of close reading and listening is inspired by the articles *An Introduction to Close Reading* by David Schur (1998), and *In Defense of Close Reading and Close Listening* by Stephen Blum (1992), and the book *Reading Pop* by Richard Middleton (2000).

### First, the feeling of abandonment

The first part of *Wildlife* speaks of loss and abandonment, which is the trigger for the events, and the reason behind the narrative. This is established in the album's opening track *a Departure*, the first of the four monologues, with a title that reflects both the starting point of the album, this section, and the *departure*: a metaphor for the start of the narrator's mental issues, which has been triggered by abandonment. In *Harder Harmonies*, the topic of abandonment is manifested in the story of a man who is unable to connect with his surroundings, leading to an attempted suicide. *St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues* shifts the focus from a personal sense of loss to the decay of a once vibrant community, which works as a metaphor for the narrator's sense of decay. *Edit Your Hometown* is the final song in this group of songs and speaks of loss from the perspective of a person who feels abandoned in the city where he grew up, as his friends have moved away.

This section also establishes the performance. Just as the lyrics vary in terms of the directness of the discourse while maintaining a common theme, the sound and instrumentation feel coherent and systematically organized, while also being dynamic and complex, and the songs segue into each other, which drives the plot forward. Not only do we learn about the narrator and his motivations, but we are also introduced to a meta-discourse, and are provided textual ambiguity which allows the listener to relate to the narrative on different levels.

a DEPARTURE

NIGHT FELL ON ME WRITING THIS AND I RAN OUT OF PAPER SO I CROSSED THE NAME OUT AT THE TOP OF THE PAGE. NOT SURE WHY I'M EVEN WRITING THIS, BUT I GUESS IT FEELS RIGHT. IT SORT OF FEELS LIKE I HAVE TO. LIKE AN EXORCISM.

I GUESS THAT MAKES ME SOUND CRAZY BUT THAT'S ALRIGHT. LATELY, I FEEL LIKE I MIGHT BE. NOT THAT I'VE HEARD ANY VOICES OR ANYTHING. JUST LIKE THAT EVERYDAY KIND WHERE YOU FORGOT THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T AND YOU THINK TOO MUCH ABOUT BEATIT.

MAYBE YOU KNOW WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. OR, MAYBE YOU WOULD HAVE KNOWN? OR HAD KNOWN? OR IS IT ONCE KNOWN?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TENSE TO USE.

I KNOW I NEVER USED TO FEEL LIKE THIS. I USED TO NEVER THINK OF DEATH OR HEAR VOICES. I USED TO FEEL LIKE EVERYTHING WAS PERFECTLY IN ORDER—A "NORMAL" LIFE—BUT I GUESS THEN CAME A DEPARTURE.

THAT I KNOW YOU UNDERSTAND (OR WOULD'VE UNDERSTOOD) AND I GUESS THINGS CHANGED AFTER THAT, AND I'M MOSTLY SCARED NOW.

BUT IT'S THERE IN THE STORIES, OR WHATEVER THEY ARE, YOU CAN SEE IT. ANYBODY COULD IF THEY COULD LOOK. I WROTE SOME NOTES IN THE MARGINS EXPLAINING IT, THE REST IS IN BETWEEN LINES OR IN THE FINE PRINT. FIRST, THE FEELING OF ABANDONMENT, THEN TRYING TO COPE, THEN DEATH AND HOPE AND THE THING ITSELF, ALL WAITING FOR ME. IT'S A LITTLE IN THE PAGES AHEAD OF THIS. IT'S THERE WAITING FOR YOU, OR FOR ME. I'M NOT SURE.

THE WHOLE STORY.

Figure 2 - A Departure

While *a Departure* is an introduction to the album and its narrative, it contains no set narrative structure in itself. Rather it provides some context as to who the narrator is, where he is, his past, and his mental state. There is no description of any location or setting in this song, yet it paints a vivid image of the author's surroundings in the beginning. The first sentence "Night fell on me writing this and I ran out of paper" (1'05"), demonstrates that the author is, while probably sleep-deprived, sitting at a desk desperately writing down his thoughts. There is no change of setting during the song, and although the words in combination with the music create mental images of the author's surroundings, the setting in this song is not of any particular importance.

As the first song on the album, *a Departure* sets the tone for the entire ordeal. With its metallic and dissonant introduction, you get a sense of unease from the first second, while the low volume begs for your attention before hard-hitting drums and guitars create an imposing soundscape. As the vocals enter, the drums follow Dreyer's articulation closely throughout the song, emphasizing each word, and instantly placing the story at the center of attention. The guitars and bass do not take up much space in the soundscape, although they are

constantly articulating melody, harmony, and rhythm that reflect and emulate the narrator's feeling of dread and abandonment. The song is not as hard-hitting and fast as one tends to find in the hardcore genre, but it is still intense, and it grabs the listener.

As the vocals are spoken and not sung, the guitar provides the melody. In the first and second verses, one guitar provides a calm and distant melody, before strong feedback underscores the word "departure", leading into the third verse where both guitarists start hammering out their chords, taking up much more space in the soundscape. The song fades out through dissonant guitars and distant yells, as it leads into the next song.

*A Departure* is written in the form of a letter, so the language is formal and direct. The text is highly personal, as it is explaining the narrator's growing issues, and the singular first-person pronoun *I* appear 20 times during the song, which emphasizes the narrator's inability to look beyond his own issues. The repetition of the /at/-sound provides assonance, but beyond this, there is little use of prosody. There is a bit more use of figurative language, however. The initial remark that "night fell on me writing this" is an idiom and a personification of "night", which helps establish the setting, and, as we know, the *Departure* is a metaphor for what triggered the narrator's mental issues.

There are two events described in this song: One current, and one previous. The current one is the writing of the letter, which is such a frustrating task, that the narrator ends up crossing out the name of the recipient. Although we are not told what the triggering event is, we know that it has caused severe mental issues, as the narrator states that "I never used to feel like this, I used to never think of death or hear voices" (1'52"). Dreyer himself wants the nature of the departure to be ambiguous, as he wants it to be relatable, even if your own "departure" is triggered by something completely different than his (Pedulla, 2012, 2'05").

On top of presenting the conflict, the song also doubles as a table of contents, as the author mentions the four thematic passages of the narrative:

"First the feeling of abandonment, then trying to cope, then death and hope and the thing itself, waiting for me. It's all there in the pages ahead of here. It's there waiting for you, or for me, I'm not sure" (2'35").

We now know what the contents of the coming songs will be, but we do not know any details. We also do not know the true motivation behind the writing, as the final line leaves it open for both the recipient of the letter – as well as the listener – to decide how to treat the following

words. Is it for his own soul searching? Just him trying to cope with mental illness? Or is it him trying to win his old girlfriend back? Or is it just pure fabrication, made for the listener to relate to, and grow as a person? Maybe all of the above?

There is a strong connection between cause and effect in this song, as the departure is what leads to the writing of the letter. The cause is not directly alluded to, but it is insinuated and hinted towards a break-up, as we know that the letter has a recipient, even though he is hesitant to name this person. There is no given timeline in which the events happen, and the narrator himself is unsure of the timeline, stating “I don’t know what tense to use” (1’49”), as if all the triggering events have muddled his sense of time and space.

While the very first verse describes the narrator’s surroundings and state of mind, it also establishes a meta-discourse that is prevalent throughout the album. By blurring the line between what is real and what is imagined, this aspect helps create a sense of sincerity and authenticity. As we move from song to song, this meta-discourse will be elaborated on, and as the album reaches a conclusion, it becomes clear that the meta-discourse is a large part of how the narrative and the performance interconnect.

## Harder Harmonies

Like a shadow on a shadow, a phantom in a film strip,  
Faint glimmer of the past trapped in mother's old slides.  
Sits still in the apartment while sifting through some pictures  
of the child that he once was and the sense of hope they framed.

"It's a shame,"

AND I FEAR THAT Fate WHILE THE HUMMING FROM THE STREET KEEPS ME AWAKE.

He says, "I let life get twisted. Get worn out, torn up, and late with the rent.  
And now nothing makes sense except the bench and that piano. A feeling nearing  
order when I'm pressing down the chords." And he plays,

AND IT SWELS AND BREAKS BUT WHAT IT TAKE TO MAKE MY LIFE SOUND LIKE THAT.

And brings a fever, a dream of sweat and ecstasy. A kiss on every hammer hit that follows as the keys fall  
down and bring an order first, then chaos, then a calm, that paints every shift in murals on the wall. And  
it presses to your neck, it clutches to your hips, softly sings to you of fireworks and God and art and sex  
and it's strange—that it feels so right when nothing else does.

But all the while he's playing there's a humming  
Coming up and through the window from outside.  
And even he has to admit a certain melody in it,  
But then why can't he harmonize?

It's like the city's got it's own song but he can't play along.  
He sees the notes as they fly by but always plays them wrong.  
And in the bathroom it gets blurry, gets warm and distorted,  
like light pushed the orange of the pillbox he poured in his palm.  
It falls to the floor, he smiles as it hits,

"Sounds a little like an instrument."

LIKE A VOICE IN THE CHORUS, THAT RUM AND THAT DRUMBAT OR LIPS AS AN AIRFOAM AND  
AND BITE THROUGH THE STREET THAT KEEP MOUNTS US IN SILENCE TO PHANTOM BATH SWEETS,  
KEEP TAPPING TO THE BEATS OF OUR FEET. AND ALL THE ONES WHO SEEM TO FIT THE BEST,  
INTO THE CHORUS NEVER NOTICE THERE'S A SONG AND THE ONES WHO SEEM TO HEAR IT END  
OF THE WORLD BY THE CHORUS WHOSE TUNE THEY FAIL TO FIND A WAY TO SWIM ALONG.  
AND THEN YOU FIND THE NEWS AND IT ALL STARTS COLLAPSING. STARTS TO RUN OUT  
AND RUN BACK, STARTS LAPSING AND CLASHING IN NOTES THAT DON'T CLASH BUT THAT  
NEVER OWE FEEL LIKE THEY MATCH. AND I NEVER QUITE FEEL LIKE MY MATCH.  
THERE'S A MELODY IN EVERYTHING, I'M TRYING TO FIND A HARMONY BUT NOTHING SEEMS  
TO WORK, NOTHING SEEMS TO FIT.

Figure 3 - Harder Harmonies

*Harder Harmonies* is the first story-driven song, which takes place in an apartment. A man is sitting still, while “sifting through some pictures” (0’13”), reflecting on how his life has taken a wrong turn. He has a piano, and finds relief in music, although his surroundings are a constant reminder of how he struggles to find his place in society. “There’s a humming coming up and through the window from outside” (1’25”) that creates a dissonance in his own sense of melody, implying that although he can rationalize his surroundings, he is unable to engage with it. This leads him down a dark path, which ends with him standing in the bathroom where it is implied that he commits suicide by swallowing too many pills.

After a drum break that bridges the gap after *a Departure*, *Harder Harmonies* lives up to its name with its immediate and hard-hitting sound, and the music underlines the desperation the focalizer feels with a high tempo, distorted guitars, and feedback. The song has four different parts if you split it by its melodic and rhythmic structures. The first part consists of two verses, in which the narrator’s notes create the division. The second part sees

the volume and intensity drop as the instruments alternate their groove and melody. The third part sees the intensity dropping further, as it reflects the sadness that fills the focalizer in the lead-up to the suicide. As soon as the pillbox has dropped to the floor, the song reaches its climactic ending in the fourth part. Here, the intensity reaches a new height, before the catchy and groovy melodies fade into cacophony and feedback as it reflects the narrator's feeling of disconnect and dissonance.

The first stanza has consonance on the fricative consonants /s/, /ʃ/, /f/, /ð/, and /θ/, and the affricate /tʃ/. (**sh**adow on a **sh**adow, a **ph**antom in a **film strip** // **sifting th**rough some **pic**tures of **th**e **ch**ild **th**at he once was). Although this consonance is not as striking throughout the song, these sounds are still used for effect in the later verses, and the use of rhymes becomes more noticeable. The song is written in free verse, so there is no rhyme scheme, but there are instances of rhymes and assonance in every verse. The use of assonance on the short monophthongs /e/ and /ə/ is frequently used in the first half of the song, but is more scattered in the second half. A good example is the phrase “Nothing makes sense except the bench and that piano, a feeling nearing order when I’m pressing down the chords”. The vowels /i/ and /i:/, and diphthong /ai/ are also used for assonance, which is especially noticeable in the repetition of the last quatrain “There’s a melody in everything, I’m trying to find a harmony but nothing seems to work, nothing seems to fit” (3’00”). This creates a feeling of order that is contrary to the topic of the song, which is all about being unable to find such patterns in the “melody of life”.

The use of rhyme is a bit more scattered, but there are instances of both internal rhymes and end rhymes. While the internal rhymes are related to the previously mentioned assonance, the end rhymes show up in a few stanzas. One stanza has three end rhymes in quick succession in the lines “fire through the **streets** that keep moving us in silence to phantom baton **sweeps**, keep tapping to the tempo of our **feet**”. The next stanza rhymes the ends of the second and fifth lines with “**song**” and “**along**”, while the following mixes internal rhymes and end rhymes in the phrase “when you **sing** the wrong **thing** it all starts **collapsing** [...] **lapsing** and **crashing**, on notes that don’t **clash**, but that never quite feel like they **match**” (2’39”). This also sets up an end rhyme on the previously mentioned assonance with the word “**everything**” in the songs finishing quatrains.

The use of metaphor and simile is perhaps even more prominent than the use of prosody, and the very first phrase is a simile: “Like a shadow on a shadow, a phantom in a film strip” (0’03”). The scene of the suicide also uses a simile for effect, as the focalizer states

that the pillbox hitting the floor sounds “a little like an instrument” (2’00”). The use of metaphors is even more essential, however, as they lay the foundation for the song’s narrative, and are frequently used intertextually in coming songs.

The title of the song, *Harder Harmonies*, contains a couple of plausible meanings: It could be a reference to the intensity of the music, as it is one of the most fast-paced and hard-hitting songs on the album, or it could mean that the harmonies the narrator refer to are hard to grasp. Both variations are valid, but the latter does connect more with the song’s themes. The recurring metaphors are “song”, “hum”, “harmony”, “melody”, “chords”, and “chorus” which are of course all connected to music. This reflects that the focalizer is a struggling musician who has a hard time connecting with society, and finds it easier to speak in musical metaphors than in a direct language. The precise meaning of the mentioned metaphors is up for interpretation, however, and is left ambiguous, which is the author’s intention.

There are two voices apparent in this song. The focalizer tells his story, while the narrator makes a few comments, before becoming the sole voice after the suicide. As there is just one voice delivering the lyrics through song, it is the narrator who mediates the story. The story is told from a third-person perspective, and the level of detail suggests that the narrator has intimate knowledge of what the focalizer is going through. This is especially apparent as the focalizer plays the piano, and the narrator describes his feelings in a poetic and verbose way. “And brings a fever, a dream of sweat and ecstasy. A kiss on every hammer hit that follows as the keys fall down...” (0’44”).

There are no detailed descriptions of the focalizer’s surroundings, but by mentioning where the events take place you get a sense of the isolation that the focalizer experiences. An apartment is surrounded by other apartments, buildings, and people, so the narrator places the focalizer in a setting where he is surrounded by the city and people he fails to connect with. The same mechanism is used in the story’s climax, as the scene of the suicide happens in the bathroom – a place where one is almost always alone, where it is warm and intimate – which provides a claustrophobic feeling of isolation, where everyone can easily visualize someone opening a pillbox.

The focalizer is loosely based on artists who have committed suicide, like Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and Kurt Cobain, artists whom Dreyer in *Conversations* (2012, 5’57”) pointed to as being unable to reconcile their talent with their surroundings. *Harder Harmonies* is told in a less direct way than most other songs on *Wildlife*, which helps create a dissonance in the narrative, as it further underlines the focalizer’s inability to speak straight



and casually. Although the story is relatively easy to grasp, it is written with rich imagery, which helps make the focalizer's story relatable to people who suffer from social detachment.

In the last part of the song, after the focalizer swallows the pills, the narrator starts to reflect on whether he is going down the same dark path as the focalizer. The narrator tries to empathize with him, and he finds himself struggling more and more with his demons, and at the end of the song, he starts using the same vocabulary as the focalizer when he uses song as a simile for life: "Like a voice in the choir, that hum and that drumbeat or life as an artform [...] and when you sing the wrong thing it all starts collapsing" (2'02"). The song ends as the narrator dwells on his inability to grasp reality, and while the final line could be read as a struggle with writer's block (3'00"), the context which I have described makes it clear that his comparison with the focalizer has deepened his issues.

## St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues

Stained-glass and the choir sing out that strong and ceaseless chorus here.  
 So sweet the voices, sweep like leaves into the street.  
 On Eastern, a celebration carried on for God and hope and refuge  
 To keep each other, life; give shelter from the storm. And keep warm.  
 The congregation gathers outside in the parking lot, each service done  
 they keep the old hymn rolling on and on ~~and on~~  
 AND I SEE THE SCENE IN COLOR EACH DAY DRIVING OUT TO EASTOWN.  
 THAT OLD ABANDONED CHURCH AND HOW I WISH YOU COULD SEE WAY?  
 Through the sixties flourished and the seventies in flux.  
 The eighties fluctuate each year unclear of when the money would dry up.  
 And when the nineties' violent crime and rising unemployment rates came by  
 That parking lot grew dim and thin of sinners and saints  
 Until the voices, unceasing, slowly faded to black  
 Until the weeds stormed the concrete from unattended cracks.  
 IT HAD TO HURT, HAD TO FEEL THAT GUY, NEVER COMING BACK LIKE I COULD  
 FEEL IT WHEN THE PASSION LEFT, THE LAST OF WHAT I HAD. (IT HAD TO KNOW.)  
 Ten years now standing vacant.  
 Ten years on empty, maybe more.  
 Once held the faith of hundreds,  
 Soon one more cell phone store.  
 For years, they gathered here  
 Inside the building, sound and true,  
 To sing their praises to a god that gave them hope,  
 To carry on, to carry through.  
 SO I BEGAN THINKING ABOUT THAT, SOME TIMES GO SLOW WHEN I DRIVE BY, HOW A HOME OF STARS AND  
 A HOUSE OF BRAWNY GLAIVES IS EMPTY ONE TIME. WHAT GAVE THOSE PEOPLE PURPOSE FAST DEATH APPROACHING  
 CAN STAY IN NEW LEFT TO CEMENTS STAINLY, NOW LEFT TO WITHER WITH THE WEEDS WEEDS.  
 Now left to ice and vandals,  
 The advent candles long since gone,  
 The old foundation shifting hard,  
 The concrete overgrown, but  
 that stained-glass window sits untouched  
 amongst the brickwork worn,  
 A symbol of the beauty only perfect at that moment we were born.  
 AND JUST THE OTHER DAY I SWEAR I SAW A MAN THERE  
 PULLING WEEDS OUT OF THE CONCRETE, SWEPTING UP AND  
 PATCHING CRACKS. I SAW HIM LIGHT A ROT TO WASH THE YEARS  
 OF RITUAL RAIN OFF THE WINDOW. MADE ME WONDER  
 IF THERE'S ANYONE LIKE THAT FOR YOU AND ME AND  
 ANYBODY ELSE WHO BELIEVES  
 WHO BELIEVES AND LAST HOPE.

LIKE I KNEW.  
 AND, CAN'T FIND  
 IT STILL  
 MEANT NOT ENOUGH.

Figure 4 - St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues

In *St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues*, the feeling of abandonment shifts from a personal sense of loss and isolation to the decay of a once vibrant and populous church community. The church and its community are a representation of the abandonment and struggle that the narrator has experienced. He used to be a happy and spirited individual, but something happened that made him crumble over time (Pedulla, 2012, 10'39"). The theme is articulated through a historical poem, in which the narrator reflects on the loss of faith and hope that follows as a congregation ceases to bring life to a beautiful building that once brought them faith and togetherness.

The real St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church is located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, not too far away from where Jordan and Brad have worked (Pedulla, 2012, 10'59"). The old, abandoned church and its surrounding area give a location to this specific story, and a sizable portion of the lyrics describe the church itself. The narrator is painting a picture of an old run-down building, a skeleton of its former self. He finds himself driving past the church and imagines what it would have looked like in its heyday: "And I see the scene in color each day driving out to Eastown" (0'46"). The church has "been left to ice and vandals", and "the concrete [is] overgrown", but the "stained-glass window sits untouched" (2'45").

While parts of *St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues* are intense and hard-hitting, this song is slower and less intrusive than its two predecessors. The song starts with a simple guitar hook that continues through the first verse. While the chord progression of the introduction does not reappear in the song, the strum pattern reappears after the second verse. The soundscape is not as busy as several other songs on the album, with a slow intro, and a quiet part in the middle of the song where the vocals are accompanied by a single fingerpicking guitar. The song then builds towards a crescendo, but the song ends quite abruptly before it reaches a fulfilling climax. This reflects the narrative in that although the narrator is starting to get a sense of a positive outlook, he does not quite reach a point of comfort.

As the narrative in *St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues* is centered around a historical poem (Pedulla, 2012, 10'05"), this song contains vivid use of both prosody and figurative language. The first verse contains alliteration on the voiceless sibilant /s/, which accentuates the question proposed by the narrator at the end of the verse; "Have I gone the same sad way?" (0'52"). The use of alliteration diminishes somewhat after a backing vocal rhyme "keep warm" with "shelter from the storm"<sup>2</sup>, but the use of /s/ is noticeable throughout the song. The second verse starts with alliteration on the voiceless labiodental /f/, (flourished // flux // fluctuate), while the third verse contains assonance on the vowel /e/.

The structure of the song is to a larger degree informed by the music than the text, but each verse does, as I have mentioned, have its own lyrical qualities. This is most noticeable in the third verse, which consists of two quatrains with alternating rhymes and terminal assonance ("vacant—more—hundreds—store", "here—true—hope—through"). There are sporadic instances of end rhymes in every verse, but the use is never as structured as in the third verse. The use of repetition is also noticeable, with repeating imagery (stained-glass), and phrases ("now left to...", "ten years", and "Have I gone the same sad way?"). The repetition of phrases is also accentuated by the music as they occur between or right after a verse transition.

Although the events of the poem span through decades, there is no concrete plot in which we see a focalizer change through a prolonged period of time. The narrator is not experiencing the action, but he is imagining a story based on what he sees and draws parallels

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<sup>2</sup> This is also a reference to Bob Dylan's song "Shelter from the Storm" (1975), which according to some was written about his failing marriage, and in which the narrator wonders if love lost can be found again (Patton, 2022).

from this to his own life. The first verse is told in the present tense, which places the narrator in the story. After the narrator asks if he has “gone the same sad way”, the story continues in the past tense, which shows how the narrator at first visualizes the events like a flashback, before he distances himself from the church and imagines what has happened through the years leading to his arrival. The events are triggered by the narrator’s observations outside the church, and the effect of that observation is him realizing that his mental health has been deteriorating for quite some time. The song does however end on a more positive note, when the narrator speaks of the man pulling weeds and sweeping outside the church (3’05); this image suggests that he starts to understand that although his life is in a bad place, it is not beyond repair.

## Edit Your Hometown

An outcry,  
 To lost dreams and sense of wonder  
 To the streets that raised him. Say,  
 "Goodbye" to the hope for the home he'd been holding.  
 Say, "Goodbye" and "Be gone" and "Be great."  
 To the friends who left when they still could,  
 For the ones who chose to stay to waste away unplaced,  
 Alone, and pray  
 To get out,  
 To grow old,  
 To grow strong and  
 Leave this city, so familiar all it's places,  
 All these memories turn each day more to gray,  
 More they space out till it's once a year we'll catch up, maybe less, or  
 Else just daydreams while he's working late  
 Thinks only of those friends and when they left.  
 "Are we still friends at all, my friends?"  
 Rewind and find a younger man,  
 All hopes and goals and dreams alight and  
 Bright with friendship at the crossroads in the night.  
 "Now make a choice," the city said.  
 We were barely twenty then, but  
 while I swore it my allegiance  
 They chose leaving, all my friends. And  
 Now it's letters, maybe phone calls, that  
 Come less and less each year.  
 All addressed with wives and children  
 To the fool who chose to stay here.  
 And it hurts me to know I'm alone now,  
 And it's worse when I know that I chose it.  
 Don't make the same mistake as me,  
 Don't make the same mistake.  
 AND NOW MY FRIENDS HAVE AN OFF. OR IT'S BECAUSE HE'S GONE ALONG. I GUESS WE ALL PART ONE DAY AND  
 DEAD LIKE WINGS INTO THE BRICKS. AND WHY IS IT WILD? WHY IS IT BITTER? (DIDN'T IT CARET YOU FROM ME?) BUT  
 IT'S THE FEELING WITH MY FEEL THAT KILLS ME HERE. SEE, IN GO IT'S LONG YOU CAN'T RETRACING IT (CAN I FORGET YOU?)  
 I STILL BELIEVE I MIGHT GET LEFT FREE. I MIGHT TURN GO STILL SWEEPING UP THE GUTTERS IN WILL I FORGET YOU?  
 THE STREET OR WEDDING CONCRETE. WANT AND SEE. WE'LL WANT AND SEE. OR LATER, I WILL. ONLY ME, ONLY ME.  
 "Don't make the same mistake as me. Say 'Goodbye' and 'Be gone' and 'Be great' and be done and be free."

Figure 5 - Edit Your Hometown

*Edit Your Hometown* tells the story of a man who feels abandoned in the city where he grew up, as all his friends have left in search of greener pastures. The feeling of abandonment that has followed the narrator thus far is now linked to a crossroad in his life, where he must decide whether he is better off leaving his surroundings or staying put.

*Edit Your Hometown* is more immediate and concise than the previous songs, which creates a sense of urgency and frustration in the narration. The guitars are rhythmically stable throughout the song, apart from some accentuation in the second and third verses, and the twangy guitar solo that fades out with the song. What the song lacks in complexity, it makes up for in intensity, with drums that constantly hammer out a standard punk rhythm, that mirrors the torrent of words that is delivered from Dreyer. The song reaches a small climax towards the end – where the narrative brings a glimmer of hope with the mention of a man who is sweeping the gutter – which leaves the song on a hopeful and positive note, creating a sense in the listener that there is room for optimism in a section of songs that has been rather downbeat up to this point.

The lyrics contain alliteration on the glottal /h/ in the first verse with the line “say goodbye to the **h**ope for the **h**ome **h**e’d been **h**olding”, and end-rhymes (man // and // allegiance // friends // year // here) in the second verse, which helps provide flow to the vocals. The repeated use of “to” also creates a consistency in the text, and reflects back to the initial line that this is “an outcry” directed at someone or something.

Although the name of the city is not mentioned, it is easy to conclude that Grand Rapids is the hometown in question. Not just because the band is from there, but also because the man who is sweeping the gutter is an intertextual reference to the previous song: “I might turn 63 still sweeping up the gutters in the street or weeding concrete” (2’14”). The events are not temporally anchored, but are rather tied to flashbacks and small anecdotes shared by the focalizer: “Rewind to find a younger man...” (1’04”). While the focalizer has decided to stay in his hometown, all his friends have left. They still speak sporadically through phone calls and letters, but as time pass, so do their connections. While they are established with families, he is left alone, and the feeling of abandonment is worsened by the fact that it was an active choice (1’32”). The narrator relates to this sentiment, remarking “now my friends have all left, or it’s been me gone all along” (1’44”). The narrator explains that it is his fear that keeps him there. It is not specified what he fears, but as he asks, “Do I regret you? Can I forget you?” (2’06”), we can assume that leaving town would make his breakup “real”, and he does not know how he would respond and cope with this reality. Better to be lulled by a false hope.

The perspective shifts halfway through the song. While the first half is written in the third-person, with phrases such as “say goodbye to the hope for the home **h**e’d been holding” (0’24”), the second half is written from a first-person perspective, with phrases such as “while **I** swore it my allegiance, they chose leaving, all **my** friends” (1’17”). This could imply that the narrator is in fact telling the story, and the ambiguity indicates a close relationship between the two, even suggesting that the narrator and focalizer could be the same person. While the line between the narrator and the focalizer is clear in most of the upcoming songs, it is the first hint that the connection between the narrator and the focalizer is blurrier than what we have been led to believe.

The song ends with a statement from the focalizer, in which he urges the narrator to get out of his bubble and be free. He still has a choice, unlike the now aging focalizer, but the question is whether he can make the right one.

## Summary and discussion

This part of the album is concerned with establishing the relative feelings of the narrator, as well as the central conflict that the coming songs respond to, and even though the stories do not contain vivid descriptions of the settings and characters, the plot is quite easy to follow. A focalizer is neither named nor described in any detail, but this only makes it easier for the listeners to place themselves in their shoes. If the objective is to create a narrative for the listener to identify with, this aspect is essential, and it creates a space for the narrator to maneuver through his psyche without being forced to describe anything outside of what he relates to and struggles with. The narrative's holes and ambiguities are in other words a crucial part of the performance, as they make the narrative accessible to the listener in a way that can be applicable to them, and not just the characters of the story.

Although the songs are quite similar in form, sound, and thematic content, they all have a different feel. It is noticeable that each song segues neatly into the next, either by an added drum groove, percussive element, or faded instrumentation, which helps tie the narratives together.

While the language in *a Departure* and *Edit Your Hometown* is quite direct and prosaic, *Harder Harmonies* and *St Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues* are more poetic, and the use of poetic language – while to a various degree – is vital to how the narrative comes across in the performance. While it might blur some of the discourse, it makes the narrative and language more engaging, and as we know, it is no fun discussing something where all the answers are given. The sheer intensity and pace of the vocal delivery makes it difficult to sing (or yell) along in a live setting, but it enables the narrator to deliver his emotions through the text and not just the melodies.

Although the stories in this section are mostly imagined, there are aspects that create a sense of authenticity. The first verse of *a Departure* goes a long way in confirming that there is an *authenticity of expression*, or sincerity as I would like to call it, with the line “it sort of feels like I have to, like an exorcism” (1’17”). While this line primarily establishes a central plot point, the performative aspect of the vocals gives credence to the words, indicating that the following passages are something Dreyer needs to get off his chest, rather than his persona. Of course, there is fiction in the story, but getting the knowledge that St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church is a real place in the band’s hometown (a quick search on Google Maps confirms this), will to a large extent build up under the notion that the other events and emotions conveyed come from a place of integrity and reality. The fictional events, most

noticeable with the suicide in *Harder Harmonies*, can also be seen as authenticated in the songs. While this can be rooted in reality by Dreyer's statement that this event is inspired by real artists who have committed suicide, the sense of sincerity is also made more palpable by the musical accentuation, as the instruments and vocals lower the volume and intensity to make the relevant phrases stand out. It makes the scene feel sad, as it mimics the calm yet brutal deed, which helps the story resonate with the listener.

Although the distinction between voices is blurred in *Edit Your Hometown* – which Dreyer coincidentally has stated is the song most personal to him (Pedulla, 2012, 18'44") – the line between the focalizer and narrator is clearer in the other songs in this section. Not only because of the different fonts in the libretto, but because of the perspective from which the story is told. The narrator does in other words act as an observer in a plot that is realistic, yet fictional.

### Then trying to cope

The second part of the album starts with a calm and collected monologue, which elaborates on the narrator's mental state. The three songs that constitute this section will, according to the lyrics in *a Departure*, display how the narrator is trying to cope with his loss. This is depicted first in *a Letter*, which is a rant about the frustrations of not finding a remedy. Second in *Safer in the Forest/Love Song for Poor Michigan*, which is a story of how someone is coping by seeking shelter through solitude in the forest, and third in *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit*, which is about seeking comfort in casual sex.

In this section, I will show how these songs relate to this common theme in their own different way. The three songs are all groovy, playing a variety of rhythms and melodies, and have a similar musical feel, but the poetic language is far more potent in *Safer in the Forest/Love Song for Poor Michigan* and *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit* than in *a Letter*. As I summarize this chapter, I will briefly look at how the narrative fulfills its objective, discuss the different voices, and the interplay between the narrative and the performance, and how this strengthens the sense of authenticity.



A LETTER

EVERYBODY WANTS A REASON FOR EVERYTHING. IT'S SO MUCH EASIER WITH SOMEONE OR SOMETHING TO BLAME. I'VE ALWAYS STRUGGLED AT THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM, HAS IT BEEN A REASON OR MY CONSTANT LACK OF DEFENSE. I'VE NEVER SPENT A LOT ON FINDING A REASON, I GUESS I FIGURED THAT IT HURTS FOR A REASON. I GUESS THAT'S WHY I'VE ALWAYS TURNED TO WRITING IT DOWN, NOT JUST IN STORIES BUT THE LETTERS IN BETWEEN. I GUESS THAT'S IT HAVING THE PAGES OF EVERYTHING, TO SELF-EXAMINE.

I GUESS THE THING IS THAT I SHUT OFF FROM EVERYTHING, FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY AND MY OWN AMBITIONS, FROM MYSELF EVEN. I JUST SHUT OFF FROM EVERYTHING, SELF-DEFEATING? YEAH, PROBABLY, BUT I DON'T KNOW THAT I HAD TOTAL CONTROL OVER IT, AND I'M NOT SURE IT EVEN MATTERS WHY. SOMETIMES THINGS HAPPEN AND YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING, PLUS I'M THE ONLY WHO DEALS WITH IT ANYWAY, JO IF EVERYONE COULD DO ME A FAVOR AND JUST PUT THEIR FINGERS DOWN I'D - AND KEEP MY MOUTH -

SORRY, I KNOW I SEEM ANGRY, I'M NOT, I... I PROMISE. I JUST KNOW I DID THIS TO ME, AND I WOULD DEAL WITH IT ACCORDINGLY, AND I DON'T NEED OPINIONS FROM THOSE NEVER A PART OF IT. DON'T NEED THEM POINTING OUT MY PROBLEMS, THEY'RE MINE, DON'T NEED REMINDERS I KNOW BETTER THAN ANYONE. AND YEAH, I KNOW I SHOULD BE FINDING ANOTHER, I KNOW THAT I SHOULD BE OUT SEEKING A SUBSTITUTE, BUT JUST FORGETTING NEVER REALLY MADE SENSE TO ME.

AND SO, I HAVEN'T BEEN.

DO I FEEL EMBARRASSED ABOUT IT? I THINK YOU KNOW THE ANSWER TO THAT, I THINK YOU'D PROBABLY FEEL A LITTLE BIT EMBARRASSED FOR ME WOULDN'T YOU? I KNOW I SHOULD'VE MOVED ON AGES AGO, BEEN HAPPY ALREADY, BUT IT'S NEVER BEEN THAT EASY FOR ME, OR MAYBE IT WAS ME THAT MADE IT SO HARD. I KNOW I'VE ONLY EVER TRIED A HANDFUL OF TIMES TO FORGET THE THING BOTHERING ME, IT NEVER GOT ME ANYWHERE WITH ANYONE, NO FRIENDSHIP OR HOBBY, NO LOVER & BED WORKS. BUT LOOKING BACK I MAYBE NEVER TRIED HARD ENOUGH, AND IT IS MY FAULT.

MAYBE I NEVER TRIED AT ALL.

Figure 6 - A Letter

This section of songs is introduced by a sad and somber guitar melody, accompanied by a slow and dark bass line. As the vocals enter, the drums come in with a pattern of ghost notes and rim clicks on the snare drum. *A Letter* continues into a gradual build-up after one verse as the drums accentuate the phrase “to self-examine” (1’04”) with a concise drum break, which continues to pump out and build up the rhythm throughout the second verse. This leads into the third verse, where the drums start playing a looser groove, while still accenting the same rhythm together with the lead guitar. All the while these elements build and inform each other, there is a second guitar in the background, which entered the song simultaneously with the drums and vocals, and is – with some small variations and exceptions – constant until the end of the song. This little finger-picking melody binds all the other elements together, but also creates a slight sense of uneasiness. As the third verse ends, it leads straight into this melody being isolated, before Dreyer states “so I haven’t been” (2’29”). A new drum break introduces the final verse, where the drums play a different groove, which together with the bass accentuates certain words and phrases. The lead guitar provides a beautifully sad melody, so while the drums and bass accentuate the narrator’s words, the guitars reflect his emotions.

Just like the other monologues, *a Letter* is not a song in which the setting and location are established, and although the song is named *a Letter*, it reads more like a stream of consciousness-monologue, which would indicate that the narrator is speaking directly to someone, rather than writing to someone. The prime example of this is in the transition from the second to the third stanza, where the growing frustration makes the narrator stop mid-sentence as he says "...just put their fingers down I'd – and keep your mouths – sorry I know I seem angry I'm not, I... I promise" (1'43"). Writing a letter this way would indicate that it has been transcribed by someone rather than written by the narrator, and if the narrator did write a letter like this, it would feel quite pretentious. *A Letter* differs from *a Departure*, in that it does not have an implied setting, the language is more oral, and in *a Departure* it is established that he is writing "this" at night, while in *a Letter* no time or place is given.

*A Letter* is very direct in its delivery, which comes at the expense of the song's poetic aspects. There are however a few noticeable cases of assonance and figurative language that help color the lyrics. The song is centered around the narrator, so just as in *a Departure*, the first-person singular pronoun *I* is used so often that it creates assonance on the /ai/-sound. Furthermore, the repeated use of indefinite pronouns "everything", "anything", "anyway", and "anybody", create an absolutist discourse, which underlines the narrator's defeatist attitude.

The first metaphor in the song appears in the first verse where the narrator states that something "haunts the pages of everything", meaning that his mental struggles are at the center of this entire story. He also uses the idiom "root of the problem" (0'29") to underline his inability to move on from the initial departure. Another metaphor is in the last verse, as the narrator states that he has "only tried a handful of times to sever this thing torturing me" (3'03"), meaning he is yet to fully commit to finding a cure for his mental illness. As he continues, he states that he has not found anyone to share his bed to help him cope with his loneliness, which, together with the line "I should be out seeking a substitute" (2'18") foreshadows the song *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit*.

Two rhetorical questions – "Self-defeating?" (1'19") and "Do I feel embarrassed about it?" (2'33) – shows us that the narrator is aware of how his rumination looks from the outside, while his answers ("yeah, probably but I don't know that I have total over it" and "I think you know the answer to that") shows that he is unable to take full responsibility for letting it spiral out of control, and that there is a degree of apathy present. The narrator is growing more frustrated as he is elaborating on his issues, and the vicious circle that he finds himself in

seems impossible to escape. This makes sense, as most people can relate to a sense of anger or frustration building as one is confronted with a good argument, but one that is counter to one's initial opinion. Before the narrator can reach a sensible solution, he must confront his own ego: "Don't need reminders I know better than anyone" (2'09") is the phrase that encapsulates this notion and showcases the narrator's unwillingness to seek help. The open-ended statement at the end of the song ("Maybe I never tried at all" 3'29") does however suggest that he is starting to accept his inability to solve his issues alone, as he understands that his attempts up to this point have been unsuccessful, or even non-existing.

### Safer In The Forest

I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE.

Last snowfall left splinters and some winters never end; neither wane nor wear.  
And sunshine is like lovers and some summers just pretend; only warm the air.  
It's that I'm tired of the feeling here. It's too near to death, it's too jobless year-round.  
It's not the weather in the city or the highway moan.  
Not the streets or the buildings, neither wooden nor stone.  
Every reason to leave this place behind, why I should be alone,  
Are made of flesh and bone.

I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE,  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE.

He packed up, took 75 northbound to a brand new life and  
Waved goodbye the world in the rearview mirror. Saw it clearer in hindsight,  
The shape of it's skyline traced in a flame from the windows ablaze,  
The people restless and the streetlights glowing like  
Many beacons in the sea or like a lantern lit  
For the ones still lost out in the dead of the night. Pain  
Like lightning striking darkness once, no thunder, no ~~rain~~  
DAYS YOU'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE?  
DAYS YOU'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE?  
DAYS YOU'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE?  
I'VE BEEN WAITING IN THE COLD AND HAZY BLUE.

Settled in that still forest like another phantom or another shadow cast by choice.  
A noiseless chorus blows through the leaves and trees and brings a peace at last  
From a place where the song kept changing just when he was starting to get it.  
When he was starting to trust there'd be a day he'd find a way to keep the rust at-bay,  
There'd be a day he'd find a hum to help him muffle the past.  
Like thunder underwater, he hears it fading and feels no pain at all.

### Love Song for Poor Michigan

TO A BORING, DESPERATE CITY,

It's been weeks since I've been around you. Has the fear begun to fade away like sunlight  
when it sinks into the lake? Are they now building up, or breaking down and boarding up the fronts? Has  
the whole town been foreclosed now? And what happened to those youthful dreams sunk deep in the  
river weak? Or got tangled up in weeds or else they're stumbling drunk on Wealthy Street? Or making  
plans to leave? I need to leave. I can't marry this place. I won't bury the past. I just need a change of  
scenery. I will hold these old streets sweetly in my head like her. And I will praise their bravery always  
and again. Let tongues confess the plague of joblessness a temporary illness. Let us wave their flag from  
there to here then over and again and let us hope for better things though we may not ever get them.

We will rise again from ashes one day. Until then, just roll me away.  
I need to leave but swear I will carry you in me until the end.

So, FAREWELL, MY HOME!  
YOUR DESPERATE FRIEND.

Figure 7 - Safer in the Forest/Love Song for Poor Michigan

*Safer in the Forest* is set in Michigan during winter, where the narrator has “been waiting in the cold and hazy blue” (0’46”), and where the focalizer’s story starts with a flashback to a winter (“last snowfall left splinters” 0’56”) that still has not ended, both literally and figuratively. *Love Song for Poor Michigan* reads like a letter, written from the focalizer to the city, as he asks what has happened since he left. The phrase “It’s been weeks since I’ve been around you” (3’07”) is ambiguous, and it is unclear whether the focalizer has left the forest and returned to the city, or if he is still there.

As a *Letter* fades out, the lead guitar fades into the intro of *Safer in the Forest* with a melody of similar tonality and feel, but with a much higher tempo. The melodic theme is repeated four times, before the tempo is tapped on the ride cymbal and hi-hat as the melody evolves further. As the introduction comes to an end, the drums and bass enter with a rapid yet quiet groove to accompany the vocals. The sound of the drums is muffled, but the lead guitar continues to play the same melody in the same clear manner. In terms of structure, *Safer in the Forest* is probably the most straightforward song on the album, with three choruses and three verses. These are however presented in an unorthodox way, with the verses following the choruses. While the choruses are densely played, with the bass playing eight-notes and drums using ghost notes to increase a sense of urgency, the verses open the soundscape, as the drums lower in intensity, and the bass follows the hits on the bass drum before building up to a new quiet chorus. This is repeated until the third verse builds to the transition into *Love Song for Poor Michigan*. As the song takes a sudden and abrupt turn

when the instrumentation comes to a halt, the guitar starts strumming a quick and distinct riff, accentuated by the hi-hat, which leads into Dreyer introducing the song in the phrase “to a boring desperate city” (3’05”). This transition is quickly relieved as the instruments create a natural climax, which fades out with the song.

The straightforward structure of *Safer in the Forest* is reiterated in its poetic aspect, as the first and third choruses are written in the shape of a quatrain with an ABAB-rhyme scheme (around // blue // town // you). It also repeats the phrase “I’ve been...” at the start of each line, followed by a present participle (watching, waiting, driving, thinking). The second chorus starts the same way, with “I’ve been thinking” repeated in the three first lines. There is no end rhyme here, although the last word “alone” mirrors the end rhyme in the first verse. The end rhyme from the first chorus is repeated in the third and final chorus, but in this case, the first words in the two first lines are changed from the present perfect continuous to questions. This provides variation in the text and the plot while maintaining a cohesion that glues each part together.

The verses are similar to each other in form, but the rhyme scheme and repetition are less consistent than in the choruses. The rhyme scheme in the first verse is CDCDDEEEEEE (end // wear // pretend // air // round // moan // stone // alone // bone). The word “round” creates an imperfect rhyme, but the use of the closing diphthongs /oʊ/ and /aʊ/ are closely related, so it works fine. In *Love Song for Poor Michigan*, the use of rhymes is less prominent, but there is assonance on the vowels /i/ and /i:/ like in the phrases “...tangled up in weeds [...] drunk on Wealthy Street? Or making plans to leave? I need to leave, I can’t marry this place, I just need a change of scenery. I will hold these old streets sweetly in my head...” There are also end rhymes and repetition at the end of the song with the lines “we will rise again from ashes one **day**. Until then, roll, just roll, roll me **away**”, and “I will carry you in me until the **end**. So, Tuebor, my home! Your desperate **friend**” (4’24”).

The song’s poetic qualities give a dream-like quality to the story, which supports the idea that the story is imagined by the narrator. The figurative language is also similar in both chorus and verse in *Safer in the Forest*, which connects the two voices. While the entire song contains metaphors and similes, *Love Song for Poor Michigan* also contains personification, as he speaks (or writes) directly to the city. This personification, combined with the last verse also creates an intertextual relationship with *Harder Harmonies*, as this verse contains three metaphors that are central to that song: “Chorus”, “song”, and “hum”.

The first verse compares sunshine and summer to lovers, with which he has a strained relationship, stating that it “only warm the air” (1’06”). This combination of simile and metaphor suggests that any new relationship would just be making things worse, like a mild version of drugs, which are a temporary fix to a problem that keeps getting bigger. In the second verse, the similes are used to paint a picture of the city he is leaving behind, stating that the city is a beacon “for the ones still out in the dead of the night” (2’01”), suggesting that its presence is both a constant reminder of the past, and somewhere to return to should all else fail. The following line “like lightning striking darkness once, no thunder, no pain” is a bit more difficult to decipher, but it could mean that this is the only chance he has to get away. This simile is repeated in the last verse of *Safer in the Forest*, as he states: “like thunder underwater, he hears it fading and feels no pain at all” (2’47”). This time there is thunder but no lightning, and it cannot hurt him as he is safe in the forest.

As I have established, this song is about coping with loss, and as it follows the rhetorical question “maybe I never tried at all” in *a Letter*, one could see it as the narrator’s attempt to run away from his problem, as it is getting too difficult to stay at a place that is constantly reminding him of the initial departure. The first part of the song tells the story of a person who has packed up and left after blaming himself for his current issues. The second part is an opposite reaction to the same issues, where instead of blaming himself, he blames his surroundings. It depicts two different and dramatic responses to a problem: first isolation, then immersion (Pedulla, 2012, 26’ 02" - 27’01").

While the focalizer leaves the city in search of peace, the narrator only thinks about doing it. The first verse follows as the narrator states “I’ve been thinking too much of you” (1’53”). *You* in this phrase could refer to the woman who left him, but also the focalizer and the envy he feels as he was able to abandon everything. The ambiguity suggests that the focalizer is a figure of the narrator’s imagination, or the narrator imagining himself taking the crucial step to leave his familiar surroundings. The focalizer speaks of a town that is “too near to death” and “too jobless year-round” (1’10”), an imagery that when combined with the descriptions of winter is cold and uninviting, and so the first verse describes the focalizer’s “reason to leave this place behind”. In the second verse, the focalizer packs up his bags, and drives interstate “75 northbound to a brand-new life” (1’41”). The third verse sees him “settled in that still forest” (2’22”), where he is able to find peace.

In *Love Song for Poor Michigan* the focalizer asks a series of questions, before concluding that “I need to leave, I can’t marry this place” (3’38”). In the context of the first

part, this suggests that he is reaching a conclusion that he should return to the city. While a change of scenery has done him good, he understands that he cannot “bury the past” (3’41”), and it is better to return and immerse himself in the surroundings he tried to escape.

*Love Song for Poor Michigan* starts with a wordplay on Michigan’s motto “Tuebor”<sup>3</sup>, as the song is introduced with the phrase “to a boring desperate city” (3’03”). The end of the song, where he sings “So, Tuebor, my home! Your desperate friend” (4’28”), inverts this, now stating that it is he who is desperate. This shows that although he has a strained relationship with his home state and his heritage, there is an underlying love there, and he recognizes that *he* is the problem, not his surroundings.

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<sup>3</sup> Tuebor is Latin for “I will defend”.

## The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit

AFTER SUNDOWN, BEFORE SLEEPING, I AM THE WORST OF ME  
I AM A MESS OF THESE OLD THINGS AND THE MURMUR OF HALF-DREAMS UNFOR SENSITIVITY  
AND STAGE SCENES.  
IT'S FEAR REACTION, THESE VISIONS CAUGHT SOMEWHERE BETWEEN DELUSION AND PROPHECY -  
WHAT I HAVEN'T DONE, WHAT I'VE WANTED TO, WHAT I FEAR YOU HAVE - BECOMES REALITY HERE.

Bright lights in the young night keep to the beat.

A classic party scene, crowded and interesting.

No love, no life, no history.

Just touch, just chemistry, just

A roaring undercurrent simple and sensory.

Young bodies, warm skin, perfect symmetry and

It's a moment, harmless. It's energy. It's like medicine,

It's self-discovery. SEE, AM THE SECRETS I KEEP, WHY ARE THEY SECRETS?

IT'S ONLY TEMPORARILY THAT FEELING'S FEELING OF WARMTH JUST A FLASH BEFORE THE LINE GETS BULKY,  
BETWEEN A LANGUAGE FOR MORE THAN WHAT THE BODY WANTS NOW AND WHAT THE BODY WANTS NOW  
MORE THAN ANYTHING. WAS IT INTEGRITY THAT KEPT MY HANDS TO MYSELF OR JUST THE THOUGHT OF GETTING  
TOO FAR AHEAD OF YOU? WAS IT THAT I GOT TOO Tired OF THE CONSEQUENCES? OR WAS I JUST SCARED?

No pauses, not a second guess. I ONLY KNOW I NEVER WANTED TO GET LEFT BEHIND.

First a swaying then a stumble then a swagger.

They're just movements towards feeling. It doesn't matter

neither hesitates to carry on a kind of energy,

Sweat and block out everything to

Find every aperture and compel the animal parts.

Fan flames, taste fruit, taste bitter fruit. I WANT TO KNOW WHAT IT IS IN ME THAT WON'T FOLLOW THROUGH

Just trying to learn how all the wires in the body work. THESE NIGHTS THE INSTINCT TAKES A HOLD OF MIND

Just trying to feel it out, it's like medicine. PASTORS TOO, MAYBE IT'S ONLY THAT I'VE NEVER LETTEN OUT A YOU?

Trap the healing in whatever bed they end up in.

I SEE THE COUNCIL STUFF, A VISION, IS THERE FICTION IN THIS ONE TOO?

IT'S TRUE, I'VE MADE A TALE OF IT HERE. STILL IT'S A LITTLE UNCLEAR WHO'S BEEN WANTING WHO. AND TIME  
IS ONE OF A FUNNY THING, MINDS MOVING TOWARDS THE FUTURE, GORIFYING THE PAST AND AMPLIFYING THE  
PAIN IN FILM MUS AND BREAD. SO WAS OUR TOWN HALLOWEEN SALES AS I'VE MADE IT DOWN OR JUST ANOTHER  
SPECIFICATION OF A HALF-DREAM? YES, THESE CASUALS, THE APOLLO SCENT LOUS, DID US TRYING TO GET ONTO  
MEANING. ONTO A PURPOSE. ONTO A SENSE THAT SOMETHING SPIRITUAL RELEASES WITHIN THE FEELING HTS. AND

And in that moment sparks and harps play out a sweeping melody through fog and fantasy

And in that moment there's an honesty instinctive and pure but it departs like it came, rapid and bearing

no more than fleeting ecstasy of natural harmony. They fear the notes being played and try to sing along.

Don't be ashamed, be free to the feeling. Don't be ashamed, keep feeling.

But find it: a body that makes sense. I'VE FELT IT.

Figure 8 - The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit

In *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit*, we get to dive further into the narrator's psyche, as he attempts to understand and sort out his thoughts on sex and intimate relations. In *Conversations* (Pedulla, 2012, 27'19"), Dreyer states that it could also be about over-saturation and obsession in anything, like your occupation, drugs, alcohol, or a hobby, and how you may try to numb your feelings and get a temporary fix. The theme can in other words be boiled down to escapism and loneliness. *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit* starts with the narrator dwelling on dark thoughts that often appear moments before sleeping. As the narrator falls asleep, he imagines a scene in which he (or a focalizer) enters a "classic party scene" (0'56"). Throughout the song, the perspective changes from a state of half-sleep and reflection to a lucid dream in which he immerses himself in his fantasy. The fantasies are a mix of "what I haven't done, what I wanted to" and what he fears his former partner has done (0'50").

The song starts with a drum groove that is joined by a single guitar, before a second guitar comes in with the vocals. After one verse, the bass comes in and creates a fuller soundscape in the second verse. The bass creates a clear distinction between the first verse in which the narrator is in his dream-like state, and the second in which he describes the party



scene in his dream. After a small break where a single guitar backs up the phrase “all the secrets I keep...” (1’19”), the song launches into a much more intense verse, where the two guitars and the bass are cohesive and follow the same notes and rhythms. Another break leads into a verse in which the intensity is lowered substantially. This continues, on and off until the final verse reaches the loudest climax – which in this case is not just a musical term. The song structure creates a nice and cohesive sonic dichotomy, with some creative variations in the instruments. This dichotomy works as a reflection of the narrator’s contrasting emotions: He is frustrated and short on confidence, yet he is curious and alert to the possibility that there is excitement in the future ahead of him.

The first verse uses rhymes, consonance, and assonance to great effect, with the repetition of the vowels /i:/ and /ɪ/, and the consonant /s/. “After sundown, before sleeping, I am the worst of me. I am the worst of these old themes and the murmur of half-dreams whisper seductively and stage scenes. It’s fear fiction these visions” (0’43”). The assonance on /i:/ and /ɪ/ is carried over to the second and third verses, where it appears as end-rhyme (party // history // chemistry // sensory // symmetry // energy // self-discovery // temporary // blurry // body // integrity). Although these sounds occur in later verses as well, they are more scattered. The fifth and sixth verse continues with a few more end-rhymes: first with “worry” and “memory”, before the end-rhymed sound changes to /u:/ with the words “through”, “too”, “you”, and “who”. The rhyme and assonance are in other words quite consistent throughout the song, giving a coherent feel to the narrative.

*The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit* is a title that is poetic in and of itself. The alliteration on “beautiful” and “bitter” creates an oxymoronic phrase, which encapsulates the narrator’s torn disposition. The title could mean several things, but in the context of the narrative, it is quite clear that sex – or specifically sex outside of the framework of a relationship – is what it refers to. The metaphor of “fruit” could point to many different meanings, but in the context of the overarching narrative, in which we have already seen the use of a church as a metaphor, and where we soon will learn of the narrator’s struggling faith, it makes sense to draw the biblical parallel. The “fruit” in that case would be the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, which would symbolize temptation and knowledge. The narrator is tempted by the potential relief and comfort casual sex can provide, but just like the forbidden fruit, it is likely to come with a bitter aftertaste.

While the “real” events happen in solitude, as the narrator is half asleep, the imagined events are vividly described, with the party scene depicted as “crowded and interesting”, and

where people are exploring themselves and their boundaries in a harmless act of self-discovery. The narrator wonders why he is unable to share his inner struggles with people (1'18") and starts to reflect on what he would gain from engaging in a social activity where he could end up in a stranger's bed. He understands that the "fleeting feeling of warmth" is "only temporary" (1'20"), yet he wonders why he is unable to immerse himself in his desires, asking open questions before stating that "I never wanted to get left behind" (1'42"). This statement shows that the narrator is hesitant because he still has feelings for someone else. The dream then continues as he retorts his own remark: "No pauses, not a second guess" (1'46").

In the party scene, one can easily suggest that the narrator refers to drugs, especially with the simile "it's like medicine, it's self-discovery" (1'15"), but as it is described to be harmless, this is negated. Furthermore, the narrator asks in the next verse "was it integrity that kept my hands to myself?" (1'32"), which all but confirms that this is about relations to another person and not drugs. The phrase "find every aperture and compel the animal parts" (2'00") also points towards sex, as the metaphors of "aperture" and "animal parts" are descriptive of someone exploring each other and arousing each other's primal instincts. He takes a bite of the forbidden fruit, which does indeed leave a bitter aftertaste, and he tries to capture the feeling of embrace and intimacy, before he compares it to a medicine against his loneliness. In the final verse, he uses "sparks" and "harps" as metaphors for the ecstatic sensation, but the phrase "they fear the notes being played and try to sing along" (3'39") stands out in contrast to the positive imagery that precludes this line. The metaphor of "notes being played" is one we know from *Harder Harmonies*, but why do "they" fear it? Is it the act itself that is uncomfortable, or is it the bitter aftertaste that hits them after the act? In any case, the following line urges the narrator to embrace the occurring feelings, whether they are positive or negative. It is better to feel something than nothing.

The adverb "just" is repeated quite a few times throughout the song, which underlines how easy it should be for the narrator to act on his instincts and creates an image of the fickle nature of sexual relations and intimacy. The repetition proposes that he is telling himself that it is not a big deal – everyone does it. One could also think of the word as an adjective, meaning he tries to convince himself that this kind of behavior is moral and righteous, although it might not feel like it is.

### Summary and discussion

The second part of the album describes coping with loss through events and emotions that are relatable to many, and while *a Letter* is less poetic than the two following songs, the interplay between poetry and music in this section elevates them and binds them together in terms of performance and narrative. As the objective of the narrative is to show *how* the narrator is trying to cope with the loss, the narrator fulfills this by first establishing his inability to do so, then by proposing some possible solutions. The narrative's underlying conflict – the mental issues – is elaborated on, but not yet resolved. Instead, the section of songs leads into one that aims to find a distraction rather than an escape or a substitute.

The distinction between voices is interesting in this section, as while they are clearly differentiated between in the libretto and the narrative, there is also a clear indication that the focalizers are imagined personas of the narrator, where he is imagining himself in different scenarios. The situations described in *Safer in the Forest/Love Song for Poor Michigan* and *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit* are all realistic and could easily be based on events in Dreyer's life, but the events are framed in a manner that makes it clear that they are imagined. It is about self-discovery, but you get a sense that the narrator is hesitant to leave his comfort zone, rather than just think about it.

The urge to leave everything behind, and just hide out somewhere desolate is a thought I think many people can relate to, but few have gone through with. Finding a stop-gap solution to a problem, like alcohol, drugs, or sex is a much more common solution. Coping with emotions is difficult, and these three songs display this in a manner that can be recognized by many. While the events are not real, they are realistic and common enough to be relatable, which together with the emotional and desperate narration authenticates the narrative. The performance also brings a sense of authenticity: First, through an honest and direct monologue that is delivered like a stream-of-consciousness rant, and second through instrumentation that accentuates important phrases and words. The vocals sound at times desperate, at times calm, and at times sad. The poetic aspect is vital to the performance as well, as it provides the framework that allows all the instruments to work together with the narrative. The repeated use of the pronoun "I" links *a Letter* to *a Departure*, creating a red thread in the narrative, while the structure and use of prosody make the lyrics in the other two songs rememberable, even though the texts are dense and extensive.

## Then death and hope

The third section of *Wildlife* is the part where most listeners find themselves moved by the story, as the three following songs provide heart-wrenching depictions of unnecessary death or near-death experience. The narrative objective of this part is in other words to shift the narrator's focus away from his struggles as he tells stories taken directly from Jordan Dreyer's own experiences.

*A Poem* introduces the section by diving further into the narrator's state of mind, and his reasons for writing the texts. *King Park*, the most notorious and well-known song on the album, tells the story of a drive-by shooting gone wrong, as the wrong person is hit, and the shooter faces dire consequences. *Edward Benz, 27 Times* tells the story of Edward Benz, an elderly man who was stabbed 27 times by his schizophrenic son. He survived to tell the tale. *I See Everything* is the story of Dreyer's former teacher and her experiences from when her son died of cancer at the age of seven. It is not cheerful listening, but the stories and their characters provide a sense of hope and forgiveness that is imbued with pathos, which helps the narrative resonate with the listener.

In this chapter, my analysis looks at how the common theme of death is depicted in the narrative, and how the performance frames it. What I find is that although the sounds and rhythms in the three songs following *a Poem* are dynamic, they have in common that they place highly emotive and disturbing scenes in a musical climax, and while the use of figurative language is relatively sparse, with a direct discourse that leaves little to the imagination, the use of prosody is vital to how the narrative moves the listener. As I summarize the chapter, I speak of how this section adds to the sense of authenticity of *Wildlife* and discuss how the directness of the discourse provides a clear division between the narrative voices.

a Poem

THIRD TIME WRITING YOU A LETTER, GETTING DARKER. I'M GETTING WORSE  
AND WORSE. I HAD A REASON FOR THE WRITING, BUT TRYING TO  
EXORCISE MY DEMONS DIDN'T WORK. TO TRY TO PURGE YOU OF THE WONDER  
AND TO PURGE YOU OUT OF WONDER FOR THE FUTURE AND THE PAST.  
I WRITE A POEM:

I'M INCREASINGLY AWARE I'VE BEEN PAINING MYSELF IN BED.  
I'M INCREASINGLY ALARMED BY THE PAIN.  
I'M INCREASINGLY ALIVE TO EVERY CLOUD UP IN THE SKY,  
I'M INCREASINGLY AFRAID IT'S GOING TO RAIN.

YES, LATELY I'VE HATED ME FOR OVERPLAYING PAIN. FOR ALWAYS POINTING  
FINGERS OUT AT WHO IN FACT IS GUILTY AND FOR PICKING AT MY SCABS LIKE  
THEY COULD NEVER DO THAT. THEY CAN AND THEY WILL AND I'LL SPILL LIKE A LEAK  
IN THE BASEMENT, & DRINK IN THE NIGHT CRAWL, JUST SLUR ALL THOSE WORDS  
TO MAKE DEADBODIES THAT SWEET OLD PROGRAM, SELF-INFLICTING MY PAIN, AND  
THEIR LIVES BE THE REAL SHAME. I HEARD WHEN THEY WERE PICKING THROUGH  
THE RUBBLE, FINDING LIMBS, THEY DANCE HYMNS. BUT NOW WHAT OF WHAT I SING?

THE WORRY THE WONDER, THE SHORTNESS OF DAYS.  
THE REPLACEMENTS FOR PURPOSE.  
THE THINGS SWIFT AWAY BY  
THE WORRY, THE WONDER, MY SLEAZEBAGS OF FRAMES.  
THE REPLACEMENTS FOR PEELING.  
THE CASUAL LAY, AND  
THE WORST OF THE WILDLIFE WEARS CLOTHES AND CAN PRAY AND  
THE WORRY THE WONDER, FOR THINGS MEANS A DAY.  
ONLY DEATH UNIMPEDED, NOT SLOWING ITS PACE  
SENTS THAT PITY, OLD WORRY AND WONDER  
AWAY.

Figure 9 - A Poem

*A Poem* begins as Dreyer states “Third time writing you a letter, getting darker. I’m getting worse and worse” (0’10”). After several attempts at trying to “purge *you* out of wonder” (0’37”), it is established that the narrator is still unable to reconcile with the loss and move on with his life. *A Poem* sets up the next part of the album by stating that there is just one thing that can make him forget about the past, and that something is death. Like when you pinch yourself to focus the pain away from a different wound, the part about death aims to distract his mind from the previous events that are still haunting him.

This section is introduced by a heavy and dark bass melody that immediately sets the tone for the upcoming topic. As the vocals enter, they work like an anacrusis, and the word “letter” is accented by a cacophonous and onomatopoeic guitar sound that reflects the narrator’s frustration. The first verse of the song is backed by said bass line, distorted and squealing guitars, a percussive sound of a thin metal cable being whipped, heavy drumming on the toms, and a somber and quiet trumpet. In the transition from the first to the second verse, the rhythm is marked by the hi-hat, while the trumpet starts playing a melody that takes up more space in the soundscape. As Dreyer recites the first poem, both the instrumentation and vocals are increasingly loud and angry, and settle on a high intensity until the second poem brings the volume and intensity down to a minimum. This abrupt break shifts the

emotive delivery from one of anger to one of sadness, which are the two most common emotions to feel when dwelling on senseless death and violence.

With the name *a Poem*, it is no surprise that this song is the most poetically structured song on the album. The song can be split into four short parts, in which two are written as a letter from the narrator to his ex, while the other two are poems he attached. The first verse uses consonance on the consonant /w/, which is repeated in the second poem. The two words “worry” and “wonder” are the central motifs that are used by the narrator to describe his emotions. He has crippling anxiety and fear about the misery he is yet to experience.

The first poem is a simple quatrain with end rhymes on the second and fourth lines. Each line repeats the phrase “I’m increasingly...” (0’48”) followed by a word starting with the vowel /ə/. The word “gray”, which stands at the end of the first line, connects this poem to the second poem, which has assonance and end-rhyme on the diphthong /ei/. The second poem also repeats the initial word, with the first eight of its ten lines starting with the determiner “the”. This is broken up like a volta by the phrase “only death unimpeded...” (2’42”), which prepares the listener for what is about to come, as it makes the word “death” stand out.

The first verse repeats the metaphor “exorcise my demons” from *a Departure* to show that despite his attempts, he is unable to move on, while the first poem contains three metaphors: He has “been painting things in gray” (0’48”), which suggests that he is unable to find any joy in his life. He is “increasingly alive to every cloud up in the sky” and “increasingly afraid it’s going to rain”, which suggests that he thinks the future will get worse, not better. If he has it this bad now, what will happen when he someday encounters loss in the form of the death of a loved one? These lines also foreshadow a central theme in the last section of songs.

The third verse of the song elaborates on the first poem, pointing out the resentment he feels towards himself. “Picking at my scabs” (1’25”) is a metaphor indicating that he is making matters worse by constantly dwelling on it, just like a wound might not grow properly if you do not let it rest. Instead, he will “spill like a leak in the basement, a drunk in the night-choir” (1’34”), meaning he will do the opposite of letting his wounds rest, and rather just exhaust “that sweet old refrain” that he has been singing. “A drunk in a night choir” is a reference to the Leonard Cohen song “Bird on the Wire” (1968), and works – in the context of the verse – as an allusion to being out of place and out of touch with his surroundings as he laments his feelings.

The final part (and poem) finally brings some context to the album's title, with the line "The worst of the wildlife wears clothes and can pray" (2'30"). The narrator suggests that humanity is the worst kind of animal: We take care of ourselves, we are self-aware, loving, and forgiving, but we are also capable of causing terrible death and despair. While animals act on instinct, we are aware of our actions; we do not kill each other for nurture, but because we can be vain, vindictive, and hateful. The word *Wildlife* reflects the worst in us, yet, as the coming songs will show, it reminds us that hope and forgiveness can be found even in the darkest of times.

As is custom with the monologues, there is no established setting beyond us imagining the narrator writing it in a dimly lit room, which is only the case because of the duality one might draw from how he describes his mental health, which is "getting darker". The narrator speaks both figuratively and directly about what he is going through, and what is about to come, and elaborates on both his issues and the story as a whole. He has been trying to rid himself of the very thought of his former partner, but the "exorcism" he has been conducting has not been successful. The song also contains a reference to the previous song *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit*, in the line "the replacement for feeling, the casual lay" (2'23"), indicating that his attempts at shifting his vision by meeting someone else have not worked either.

The narrator states that he has been hating himself lately, as he has been "over-playing pain", which hints at his intentions; he understands that his pain is, at least to some degree, self-inflicted – "and therein lies the real shame" (1'52"). Other people have experienced war, death, and terror, and still managed to find faith and hope in their suffering, yet the narrator is wallowing in a pain that is invisible and irrational. This creates a deep shame – which causes further misery. The vicious cycle continues. There is only one thing that can make him forget about the worry and the wonder: The inevitability of death.

## King Park

Another shooting on the southeast side, this a drive-by, mid-day,  
Outside of the bus stop, near Fuller and Franklin. Or near there.  
Not far from the park. About a block from where the other shooting was last month.  
Or was it last week?

Shots were fired from an SUV heading northbound, Eastown,  
The target a rival but they didn't hit the target this time.  
They hit a kid we think had nothing to do with it.

AND I TRAVEL BACKWARDS, THROUGH TIME AND SPACE, I WANT TO SEE IT UNLESS I COULDN'T WHEN IT HAPPENED.  
I WANT TO SEE IT AN EARLY HAND THIS TIME.

SO I FLOAT BEHIND POLICE LINES, ESCAPE THE SLENS IN FRAGMENTS OF MEMORIES, I WANT TO SEE WHAT HIS  
MOTHER LOOKED LIKE UP CLOSE, I WANT TO SEE HER LEANING OVER THE BODY. SO I PEEK THERE, TRANSPARENT TALE,  
I WANT TO CAPTURE IT ACCURATELY, I WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE COLOR OF THE BLOOD WAS POURED OUT FROM THE  
TARP AND THE CONCRETE.

I WANT TO WRITE IT AW DOWN SO I CAN ALWAYS REMEMBER. IF YOU COULD SEE IT UP CLOSE HOW COULD YOU  
EVER PREDICT HOW SENSELESS DEATH, HOW PRECIOUS LIFE? I WANT TO BE THERE WHEN THE BULLET HIT.

And the crowd poured out as the shots drowned out into siren sounds, out of there houses now and  
Over front yards, all the way up to the place where the police tape ran to mark the crime scene.  
Everybody trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening.  
Of what was happening between the ambulance and all the cop cars.  
Everybody gossiping, "Whose kid got hit? Where'd it hit him? And who could've fired it?"  
Everybody wondering, "How did it happen again? And is he dead? These children. Our kids."  
Everybody wondering how far they were from where the victims lived.

AND I VISIT THEM, THEIR HOUSES, INSIDE MY DREAM I VISIT THEM,  
MY STREET STARCH & WIG AND HIGH UP OVER KING PARK, LEAVES THE CRIME SCENE,  
TRAVELS FORWARD BACK IN TIME BEFORE THE CELESTING,  
THROUGH THEIR WINDOWS TO THEIR LIVING ROOMS.  
I SEE THEM, YOUWER THIS TIME, PLAYING GAMES AND DOING HOMEWORK.  
ALL THESE MARKS OF YOUTH STON TRANSFORMED COULD INTO STONES  
FOR HINTS AND STUPID PRODS, FOR FUNS WRAPPED IN GOLD AND  
CEREBLY I RECAL WHAT I HAVE COME TO FIND & LEARN. BUT  
THESE CANNOT BE A REASON, NOT FOR DEATH.  
NOT LIKE THIS.  
NOT LIKE THIS.

Three days later they made funeral plans. The family.  
Three days later a mother had to bury her son.

Not far away the shooter holed up in a hotel near to the highway with a friend and the gun. <sup>HARTSBURG.</sup>  
He'd fled immediately but was identified by witnesses, his picture on TV.  
Only 20 years old they called him "Grandpa." He was older than the others by a year, maybe two.  
And he was safe for awhile until somebody saw him there and notified the authorities  
Who surrounded the hotel, first arresting an accomplice while attempting to flee,  
Then chasing him up the staircase to the room where he'd stay. He closed the door hard behind him,  
Locked himself in the room. They could've kicked in the door but knew the gun was still with him,  
One he'd already used and so they feared what he'd do.

I FLOATED UP THROUGH THE WINDOW OF A ROOM TO THE WEST. I HUNG OUT TO THE HALLWAY, TRIED TO LISTEN IN.  
I HEARD THEM TRYING TO REASON, GOT HIM TO OPEN THE DOOR. HIS UNCLE BEGINS HIS PLEADING,  
SOUNDING AND PLEADING, LIKE COLLAPSED TO THE FLOOR. HE  
His uncle preached of hope and forgiveness, said "There is always a chance,

To rectify what you've taken, make your peace in the world."  
I THOUGHT TO SLIP THROUGH THE DOOR, I COULD'VE ENTERED THE ROOM,  
FELT THE BURDEN OF MURDER, IT SHOOK THE GARN TO THE CORE.

Felt like the world was collapsing. Then we heard him speak,  
"Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?  
Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?  
Can I ever be forgiven cuz I killed that kid?  
It was an accident I swear it wasn't meant for him!  
And if I turn it on me, if I even it out, can I still get in or will they send me to hell?  
Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?"  
I LEFT THE HOTEL BEHIND. DON'T WANT TO KNOW HOW IT ENDS.

Figure 10 - King Park<sup>4</sup>

*King Park* is a direct and graphic depiction of the aftermath of a drive-by shooting that happened in Grand Rapids in 2008. While parts of the narrative are altered and imagined for dramatic effect, this story is rooted in real-life events. The theme of the song is the search for meaning in the face of senseless death, and as the narrator imagines himself amid the events,

<sup>4</sup> This image is two pages merged for formatting reasons.



he tries to find a purpose for his own life by exposing himself to the emptiness death leaves behind.

The first verse establishes the setting as we learn that the events took place on the southeast side, near a bus stop by Fuller Avenue and Franklin Street, which is near Martin Luther King Park in Grand Rapids. The culprit was in “an SUV heading Northbound” towards Eastown (0’30”), and we learn that this is an area burdened with gang-affiliated crime, as the narrator is unable to pinpoint when the previous shooting took place. As the narrator tries to immerse himself in the horrible events, he imagines what the crime scene looked like, with police lines, a mother leaning over a body, and blood spilling out on the concrete. The next scene continues with a depiction of a crowd forming and discussing the events. The second half of the song moves from the crime scene to a hotel where the shooter was “holed up”. By using these specific locations, the narrator allows for more clinical descriptions of the events as they unfold.

*King Park* emerges from the silence at the end of *a Poem* with hard-hitting drums and riffs, underlining the drama and intensity of the crime scene depicted in the first verse. As the narrator makes his introduction in the narrative (0’41”) the intensity is lowered, and the guitars start playing a quieter melody that frames the narrator’s meditative ruminations about the events. The intensity is lowered even further as the narrator imagines what it was like on the crime scene straight after the shots fell. The intensity starts to build as the narrator shifts his attention from the crime scene to the involved individuals. The music reaches a climax while the narrator struggles to understand the cruelty of the events before the intensity drops once again to a minimum to reflect the sadness of the victim’s funeral. The guitar melody continues, though a new build-up is marked by a quick drum roll on the hi-hat and rim clicks as the perspective shifts to the shooter being holed up in a hotel. As the shooter is spotted, the music changes abruptly to reflect the danger he finds himself in. While one guitar starts hammering out a single note, the other instruments play a syncopated pattern, which quite literally frames the narrative, as the strokes and hits occur in between the phrases yelled by Dreyer. This intense and dramatic instrumentation leads to the story’s climax, where Dreyer retells the shooter’s harrowing question of whether he can still get into heaven if he kills himself. As the song comes to a close, the drums accentuate each word of the final phrase, leading to an abrupt end without a musical resolution to the root chord, reflecting the narrator’s need to distance himself from the horrible ending of the story.

The directness of the discourse does come at the expense of *King Park's* poetic aspects, but the use of prosody and figurative language is still potent. The second verse is centered around the narrator's desire to witness the events, repeating that he wants to "see", "know", "capture", and "write down" the events in order to understand them. The repetition in these lines drives home the narrator's intentions, while also providing assonance that gives a nice flow to the text. The repetition of the phrase "everybody gossiping/wondering" in the next verse provides a similar effect. In the penultimate verse, which builds up to the climax, the end rhyme on "door" and "floor" makes these lines stand out together with "I felt the burden of murder, it shook the earth to the core" (6'11"). The assonance and alliteration on "burden", "murder", and "core" coupled with the personification of "murder", really drives home how desperate the situation is.

Repetition is also used for great effect in the second half of the song, starting with the lines "three days later they made funeral plans, the family. Three days later a mother had to bury her son" (4'02"). It is the finale of the song that really utilizes the effect of repetition, however, which also creates consonance and assonance:

Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?  
 Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?  
 Can I ever be forgiven 'cause I killed that kid?  
 It was an accident I swear it wasn't meant for him!  
 And if I turn it on me, if I even it out  
 Can I still get in or will they send me to hell?  
 Can I still get into heaven if I kill myself?

This is a chilling scene in and of itself, made all the more potent by its context and its delivery. This climax is arguably the most iconic part of *Wildlife*, and the way it is placed in the narrative, the way it is framed by the performance, and the way it is articulated by Dreyer is vital to how listeners respond to the song. Especially in a live setting. Without the combined use of repetition, consonance, and assonance, this would wall flat.

Although there are few metaphors in *King Park*, they are worth mentioning. "All these marks of youth soon transformed coldly into stone" (2'57") describes how the innocence of the kids turns to senseless death through "fights and stupid feuds", and "for ruins wrapped in gold". This last line works as a metaphor for gang affiliation and its meaninglessness, as they

fight for wealth, yet they end up leaving themselves, their neighbors, and their surroundings in ruins.

Although the narration in *King Park* looks similar to the rest of the songs in the libretto, there are some marked differences between it and the other narrative songs. The plot is not something a focalizer is experiencing, it is rather the narrator telling the story of a few characters whom he is imagining at the scene. In the handwritten lines, the narrator explicitly states that he is going to imagine himself at the scenes like in a flashback, and he moves around from scene to scene, reflecting on the events, while the rest of the text is a direct retelling of the events. The characters are also more distinctly referred to here than in previous songs, as the victim, the shooter, their mothers, the shooter's uncle, and the police all play a crucial role in how the events play out. The shooter is a 20-year-old called "Grandpa" by his friends (5'02"), which underlines the absurd and horrific milieu he is a part of.

While the majority of songs on *Wildlife* are told in a temporally diffuse way, the plot in *King Park* is direct and concise, with a beginning, middle, and end. We do have a flashback in the fourth verse in which the narrator imagines what the characters' lives were like before the shooting, but it does not disrupt the story's timeline. As he imagines this scene, the narrator mentions what he is trying to accomplish with this in the first place, stating "cruelly I recall why I have come to find a reason" (3'08"). He is trying to find a reason for death, but his conclusion leaves him with more questions than answers, as this flashback just confirms the meaninglessness of death in that the hope and aspiration of the victim have ceased to exist.

Although the song leaves the story open-ended with the final line being "don't wanna know how it ends" (6'48"), the sad truth is that the shooter did commit suicide. (Nagengast, 2008). While it is logical to draw this conclusion from the song (why would the narrator want to steer away from the ending if it was happy?), his reluctance to be explicit shows that the narrator has real sympathy for the culprit, while suggesting that the narrator already finds the events gruesome enough without having to dwell too much on this scene as well.

## Edward Benz, 27 Times

I heard the old man's voice break, stutter once then stop it. I heard  
A sentence started confidently halted by the sudden absence of a word.  
Stumbled and he sputtered trying to find it back, something once so simple gone now.  
When he finally gave up told me, "Aw, it's like hell getting old."

WHEN YOU CAME INTO THE STORE, DID YOU KNOW YOU'D SHOW ME YOUR STAIRS .

I had a heavy heart, he carried a door, it's shattered pane all wrapped in plastic and  
He asked if I could fix it, come by a little later help him put it back on hinges.  
"See, I'm far too old to lift it and it's not for my house, it's my son's."

WHEN YOU STARED UP THE DOOR, WHAT IS IT YOU THOUGHT YOU'D FIND? NOBODY FINCH .

Later I came by and backed into the driveway. Got out to find him waiting there to lead me through the  
side yard to back behind the house where the door frame stood empty and helped me keep it steady  
while I hammered all the pins in then later on the porch we somehow got to talking, he told me of the  
house and how his son is schizophrenic so they purchased it for him, the medication working and they  
figured it would help him fit in, help him lead a normal life. But the pills made him sleep too much.

And he couldn't keep a job as a result so one day he just gave up on taking them. And that day she had  
called you, he'd locked her outside of the house. How QUICKLY DID YOU GET THERE? AND WHAT WERE YOU  
THINKING WHILE WALKING UP? WHAT FEELS FLASHED IN FRONT OF YOU, TALKING TO YOU, WALKING TO UNLOCK THE  
DOOR? I REMEMBER IT, ED, THAT STAY YOU TOLD ME, IT CAME BACK TO ME AT ONE POINT. YOU WERE WRITING AND YOU SHOULD KNOW  
THE RESULT NEVER LEFT ME - THE WEIGHT OF MY HEART - WHEN YOU STARED UP THE STAIRS ON YOUR AUNT, WHEN I  
LOOKED IN YOUR EYES AND I KNOW WHAT YOU SAID AND YOU PROBABLY HAVEN'T DIED YET IT NOT FAR TO CALL FOR  
YOUR DAUGHTER AND YOUR WIFE, HOW HE DROVE IN THE KITCHEN, SPUN YOUR SON, HOW YOU BEGAN TO LOOK THROUGH  
ME TO SOME OLD PHOTOGRAPH SCREEN, PLATING BACK THE STAIRS AS YOU DESCRIBED IT ON A MAN'S REAL DEPTHS  
MINDS TO WHEN IT HAPPENS THAT MEMORY MOVING BEHIND ME.

THAT MOMENT THAT MAN GOD YOU FEEL GOOD .

And he drove to the house and pulled into the driveway. Got out to find his wife waiting, frantic. She'd  
come by to check, found that pillbox was empty, went out to the pharmacy to fill up his prescription and  
came back to a locked door and could not get back in. She'd knocked and she'd knocked but he wasn't  
responding.

You put the key into the lock and turned it. Felt the bolt slide away. Slowly open.

Went into the hall, his son held a knife, standing off in the shadows, lunged forward and tackled him.

Stabbing him over and over and breaking that window. He fled up the staircase. The ambulance came,  
stitched and filled him with blood while the cops took his son with his wires so tangled his father was a  
stranger. AND I SIT IN MY APARTMENT I'M GETTING NO ANSWERS, I'M FINDING NO PEOPLE, NO BELIEFS FROM THE  
ANGER - I LEAVE IT AT THAT POINT, I'M KEEPING MY DISTANCE FROM HISTORY AND HISTORY AND BLOOD ON  
THE CARPET, I'M STOPPING NOTHING, I'M BECOMING FOR NO ONE, I'M LEAVING THIS CITY AND I'M HUNGRY OUT TO NO WHERE.  
I CAREN YOUR MATH, YOUR GRANDFATHER'S CAREN. AND ED, IF YOU HEAR ME, I THINK OF YOU OFTEN.  
THAT'S ALL I CAN OFFER. THAT'S ALL THAT I KNOW HOW TO GIVE .

Figure 11 - Edward Benz, 27 Times

Although this song does not speak of a death per se, *Edward Benz, 27 Times* contains an explicit and graphic depiction of an attempted murder. This is a story about an 82-year-old man whom Dreyer met at a hardware store he was working in at the time and who sought help to replace a broken door. While the narrator struggles with his own demons, he is now told the story of the man's schizophrenic son, who tried to kill his father in a confused state. While the narrator's issues drown in comparison, the horrific story of Edward Benz and his son shows the worst-case scenario of mental disorder and gives another example of meaningless suffering.

Edward Benz's story is told straight and direct, and leaves little to the listener's imagination. There is also little use in dividing between a focalizer and narrator in this song, as the directness of the discourse makes it obvious that the story is told from the narrator's perspective. The perspective remains the same throughout the song, which has not yet been the case on the album, as the first person-perspective up until now has almost exclusively been used in the parts of the text visualized in handwriting. This gives a special feel to the song, as it deviates from the previously applied narrative structure. It suggests that Dreyer puts more emphasis on this song in *Wildlife's* progression, which makes sense, as it is the first

song he wrote for the album, and is the story which the rest of the album's narrative was built from (Pedulla, 2012, 41'45").

The events of the song can, like the voices, be split into two parts: One is the story as told by the narrator, and the second is the narrator's thoughts and questions about what Edward Benz had to experience that crucial day. The story is told from Dreyer's perspective, sequencing the story as it was told to him. It begins as Edward Benz comes by the hardware store, and continues as Dreyer went out to help him replace the door. Edward Benz's story is then told in full, but not before there is a break in the narrative, as the narrator reflects on – and teases – what is about to unfold. After the scene where Edward Benz is stabbed has played out, we are back in the narrator's apartment, where the events are placed into the context of *Wildlife*. The line "I'm keeping my distance from hotels and Jesus and blood on the carpet" (4'48") is pointing to the hotel in *King Park*, the next song *I See Everything*, as well as the events of this song. "I'm leaving this city and I'm heading out to nowhere" is a reference to *Safer in the Forest/Love Song for Poor Michigan*, while "Your grandfather's coffin" is most likely a reference to the perpetrator in *King Park*, who was called "grandpa" by his friends. The narrator is not sure how to handle the information, and while he wants to do something to help Edward, the only thing he can offer, "the only thing I know how to give" (5'18") is to tell his story, so it can touch other people the way it has touched him, further underlining the meta-discourse.

While the musical performance is calm compared to the introductions of the other songs in this section, there is an ominous quality to the song's instrumentation and melodies. The song is in 3/4 meter, with the bass accenting the first note, which helps to bring a dark quality to the soundscape, while also adding some punch to Dreyer's intonation. While there is a short break in the instrumentation as Dreyer says "nobody flinch", the riffs and rhythms are consistent throughout the first and second verse, before the third verse calms everything down as the narrator is reminiscing about his meeting with Edward and the story he was told. The melody and instrumentation of the first and second verse returns in a short fourth verse, which stages the fifth verse. This verse is a calm, sad, and brutal retelling of the events where Edward was attacked by his son. The melody here is mainly carried by the bass, which again helps to create an ominous and sad soundscape to contrast the violence. The song ends on a crescendo that builds towards a final climax as the narrative shifts to the narrator dwelling on the events.

While the use of figurative language is sparse, the instances that occur use familiar motifs. At the beginning of the second verse, the narrator states that he had a “heavy heart”, suggesting that this happened shortly after the “departure”, and that he was heartbroken when Benz came into the store, carrying the door with a shattered pane that had still not been fixed following the violence he had endured. This juxtaposition is a visual and effective metaphor for the vast difference in the pain they are enduring, and the way they handle it.

The first verse of *Edward Benz, 27 Times* contains consonance on the sibilant /s/, and end-rhyme in the two first lines (heard // word), and there is assonance on /i:/ and /i/ in the fourth verse where the narrator describes what Edward Benz looked like while telling his story, adding some color to the language: “How you **seemed** to look through me to some old projector screen playing back the **scene** as you described **it** on a **movie reel**, as **real** as the **minute** when **it** happened” (3’05”). As this is the only line with a clear use of assonance, it helps make the act of telling the story seem visual and dramatic. The simile he uses compares Benz’s outlook as he tells the story to a projector, portraying him as a visual storyteller, while also being empty and deprived of any joy. It is sad, it is grim, and it is emotive.

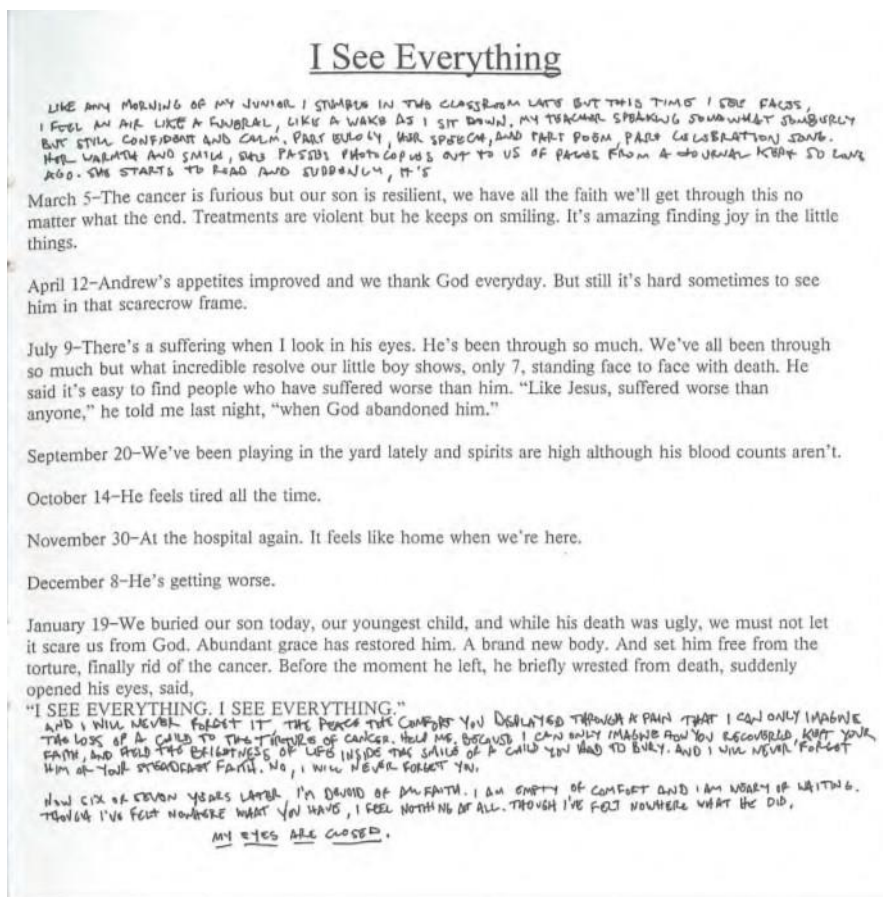


Figure 12 - *I See Everything*

While *King Park* and *Edward Benz*, *27 Times* dealt with death (or near death) through acts of violence, *I See Everything* deals with every parent's worst nightmare: The death of a child.

*I See Everything* tells the story of seven-year-old Andrew, told through journal entries written by his mother, chronicling the events leading to his death from cancer. Andrew's mother was Jordan Dreyer's high school teacher, a woman whose faith and steadfastness have inspired him (Pedulla, 2012, 57'03").

*I See Everything* is the shortest and most concise song in this section, clocking in at just over three and a half minutes. The song is introduced by a hard-hitting guitar riff and drum breakbeat, which continues into the first verse, before there is a small break marking the phrase "as I sit down" (0'18"). The music is now more melodious, with the drums playing a straighter groove, which reflects well on the narrator's description of his teacher being "confident and calm". Then there is another small break that builds up to the reading of the journal entries, with heavy intonation on "1980 March 5" (0'39") from both the instruments and the vocals. The guitars and drums play a staccato rhythm through a verse before the soundscape opens up as Dreyer sings "what incredible resolve our little boy shows" (1'19"), where the drums start playing sixteenth notes on the hi-hat, and the bass and one guitar plays

a riff which follows the 4/4 meter. The second guitar joins in after another drum break, playing a harmonic melody on top of the other instruments, which leads to a climax as Dreyer yells “January 19” (1’59”), where a cacophonous riff leads into a new melody, while the drums underline the phrase “we buried our son today”. This verse is intense but has a slight decrescendo into the story’s climax where Andrew opens his eyes and yells “I see everything” (2’32”) right before passing. The song ends on a calm and sad melody where the narrator once again reflects on the events and his inability to fully take in the horrific nature of death.

The story itself takes place in a classroom, where the narrator is late to class, and he walks into a room that feels more somber than usual. As his teacher tells the story, we are taken to the hospital and a yard, where we get to see a few days in Andrew’s short life. While the narrator is the one who tells the story, the mother is the focalizer. With both setting and voice this clearly defined, it is easy to follow the story and be moved by its contents.

The journal dates create a temporal anchoring that is not present in any other song on *Wildlife*. The song gets straight to the point as soon as the narrator reads the first journal entry, stating “suddenly it’s 1980 March 5 – The cancer is furious, but our son is resilient, we have all the faith we’ll get through this no matter what end”. The theme is in other words established in its entirety in the first journal entry, as we both learn that the child is suffering, but also that his parents are able to draw a higher meaning from it. As the narrative moves on, we learn that Andrew is in constant pain, as the only sliver of hope comes in the lines “Andrew’s appetites improved, and we thank God every day”, and “We’ve been playing in the yard”, both of which are followed by lines which emphasize that there is no progress. The song reaches a climax just after the line “December 8 – He’s getting worse”, as Dreyer yells “January 19 – We buried our son today”, which is immediately followed by an urge to “not let it scare us from God” (1’55”-2’15”).

Andrew’s last words were “I see everything, I see everything”, and although most of the journal entries in the lyrics are fictional, this is, according to Dreyer (Pedulla, 2012, 59’18”), something he took from the real journal. According to his teacher, this was the devil’s last attempt to frighten them, and make them lose their faith. This is interesting, as it gives further insight into what horror they must have seen in Andrew’s eyes. When I first heard the song, this exclamation seemed more like a religious epiphany, in which I imagined him seeing heaven. I did however not see what this event looked like, and the tone and manner of the event created an opposite reaction from his mother compared to my take from



listening to the song. In either case, the result is the same: The family kept their faith, and were able to move on, just as she said they would in the initial journal entry.

The narrator's reflection is one of awe. He has felt nothing compared to their suffering, yet he is unable to find any hope and faith. Andrew suffered a horrific death, and his family were able to move through it and stay devoted and live a meaningful life, while the narrator has been dumped and is unable to function properly. This juxtaposition wraps up this passage of the record at a point where the narrator acknowledges his faults, which for many is the first step towards recovery.

There is alliteration in the first verse on the sibilant /s/ and plosive /k/ and /p/ in the lines "...speaking somewhat somberly, but still confident and calm, part eulogy, her speech, and part poem, part celebration song". There is also assonance in the first part, which is close to being end rhymes in the words "down", "calm", and "song", in the first verse, and "violent", "smiling", and "finding" in the next. The use of prosody is not frequent, but it does help set the tone, and helps the vocals flow seamlessly with the music.

The sickness Andrew must endure is spoken of in a way that would be appropriate to speak of a demon through personification. The cancer is described as "furious", the treatments are "violent", the death is "ugly", and "that scarecrow frame" is a potent visualization of how Andrew is stretched out in pain. The adjectives paint vivid images of the suffering, and when it is applied to such a small body, it is painful just to imagine the events. The figurative language is in other words not very figurative. This is a prosaic song, which is more interested in exploring the events rather than wrapping them up in a poetic veil that makes us less exposed to the suffering. The final line, "my eyes are closed" (3'26"), works as a metaphor for ignorance, and how the narrator has ignored true suffering while focusing on his own, which leads us to the album's final part.

### **Summary and discussion**

While this group of songs is far more graphic than the two previous sections, they do conform to the same narrative structure in that the narrator imagines and dwells on other people's experiences. The division of voices is however less diffuse in this section. While the previous section of songs hinted towards the narrator imagining himself in different scenarios, *King Park* explicitly states that he is imagining himself at the crime scene. In *Edward Benz, 27 Times*, the meta-discourse is at the forefront of the narrative, as the narrator speaks of both the scenario when he was told the story, as well as speaking about his reflections in a similar

manner to what we have seen in the monologues (e.g., “I sit in my apartment”). *I See Everything* has a clear divide in terms of having an established focalizer in Andrew’s mother, yet it is the narrator who reads the journal entries, and once again he uses the story as a means to reflect on his own situation.

Although there are elements drawn from Dreyer’s real-life experiences in the previous parts as well, this section is vital for the authenticity of the entire record. These are not famous stories about famous people; random listeners do not know that the events are real unless they are told or go out of their way to find out more about the lyrics as I did. But doing so brings a whole new element to the narrative which immediately elevates the stories, and this element is authenticity. Just like a quick search in Google Maps can help you find an image of St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church as it looks today, a quick search for Edward Benz brings you to his obituary, which reads:

“Edward Benz passed away on Monday December 3, 2018 at the age of 92. He will be lovingly remembered by his wife of 71 years Lillian, son Charles, daughter Diana, two grandsons Ryan and Randy and one great grandson Ryan Matthew. Edward was preceded in death by his parents, two sisters and one brother. Edward loved sports and will be deeply missed.” (Metcalf & Jonkhoff Funeral Service, 2018).

The fact that several songs are so easily fact-checked helps the listener think that the other parts of the story are true as well. The sense of authenticity does not just derive from extratextual sources, however.

While the narrative is the star of the show in this section, the performance enables the listener to really take in the reality of the events through the song’s dynamism. The quiet parts make the loud parts louder, and vice versa, while the use of dissonance and cacophonous elements make the harmonies stand out, drawing attention to the feelings the narrator is conveying. There is no happiness, joy, solace, nor meaningfulness in these events, but the music frames the narrative in a way that allows the listener to find some anyway. The vocal performance, just as in previous sections, helps authenticate the narrative through its dynamism and intensity, especially with the outburst of the climactic phrases in *King Park* and *I See Everything*, which draws attention to topics that many can relate to, and many fear they must relate to at some point. While there is use of prosody and figurative language that

helps frame the narrative in the music, it is the stories themselves that resonate with the listener, but through the musical and poetic performance, the stories are amplified.

### And the thing itself

As the narrator has now established a sense of abandonment, how he has tried to cope with it, and seen how others are worse off than him, he must now face “the thing itself”. The objective of the last part of the album is in other words to reach a conclusion, and so while *a Broken Jar* reads like an introduction to this conclusion, *all our bruised bodies and the whole heart shrinks* reads like a summary. The album’s closing track, *You and I in Unison*, is the conclusion and the finale, and although the narrator still acknowledges that he has issues to resolve, he has reached a level of acceptance that will help him move on.

Although the narrator is still defeatist in terms of how he speaks of himself, this part is a transition from the part about death to one about hope (Downey, 2022, p. 79), and while the narrative is left open-ended, the finale of *Wildlife* ends the story by alluding to previous songs and plot points, being more direct in establishing what the initial departure was, and by letting the narrator reach a point of acceptance. The music is as dynamic as ever, while the poetic aspect works in tandem with both narrative and instrumentation to add weight to the performance.

After I summarize my findings, this section will briefly discuss how the evolution of the different voices has reached a natural end point, and look at how this is manifested in the interplay between the libretto and the songs. I will then discuss what this does for the narrative, as well as the sense of authenticity, before I look at how the meta-discourse is concluded. I will also look at how the conclusion of the album has helped establish a sense of hope, without explicitly stating it in the songs.

a Broken Jar

SO, HERE GOES: ONE LAST LETTER N.W. ONE LAST ATTEMPT TO FIND OUT WHO HAVE BEEN WRITING TO? I'M NOT SURE ANYMORE. WHAT HAVE I BEEN TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH? IT'S A MYSTERY, I GUESS. ~~SELF-MADE REVELATIONS~~ THINGS GOT CHAOTIC AND NOW ALL THESE STORIES AND THE STRUGGLE AS AN UNDISCERNANT, BOTH GOT BURIED BY THE MINUTE, BUT I GOT BURNER. SO WHICH VOICE IS THIS THAN THAT I'VE BEEN WRITING IN? IS IT MY OWN OR HIS? HAS THERE EVER BEEN A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM AT ALL? I DON'T KNOW.

I DON'T KNOW.

ONE LAST DESPERATE PLEA. ONE LAST VOICE TO SHOUT. ONE LAST LAUGH TRACK TO ACCOMPANY THE CASUAL. HAVE I BEEN LOSING IT COMPLETELY? LOSING SANITY? OR HAS IT BEEN FABRICATED, FASHIONED BY THE WISDOM OF ME? I KNOW I KNOCKED THE TABLE OVER. BECAUSE I WATCHED THE JAR BREAK. AND I'VE BEEN TRYING TO REPAIR IT EVERY SINGLE STUPID DAY BUT WHAT THE CRACKS SHALL SHOW ME MATTER. HOW WOULD IT BE ASSEMBLED? CAN I EVER JUST DECIDE TO LET IT GO AND LET YOU GO? ALL MY MOTIVOS AND EVERY SINGLE NARRATIVE BELOW REFLECTS THAT MOMENT WHEN YOU LEFT AND WILL I NEVER LET IT GO NO MATTER WHAT?

NOW I AM THROWING ALL THE PIECES OUT, DISCARDING EVERY ELEMENT, AND FUMBLING UNCERTAIN TOWARDS A CERTAIN CAUSE THAT NO ONE WANTS TO HAPPEN, THAT NO ONE IS GOING TO CLAP FOR AT ALL, BUT THAT STILL HAS TO BE.

Figure 13 - A Broken Jar

*A Broken Jar* is the last monologue of the album, with a discourse that is tied to both the previous- and the two following tracks. Narratively, the lyrics are a continuation of the previous part, in that the horrible experiences of the people in these songs have grounded his own issues, and he is now starting to acknowledge that he is at least partly responsible for letting his mental issues spiral out of control.

Although *a Broken Jar* reaches a musical climax, the volume is turned down in comparison to the other songs on the album. It starts off with two layered guitars, which are coupled with a glockenspiel after Dreyer makes his introduction. The music is calm and downbeat, and the vocals grow increasingly frustrated and emotive; while the music reflects the sadness, the vocals create a sense of frustration. The first part of the song builds towards a climax that never comes, and instead falls flat as the narrator quietly states, “I don’t know” (1’00”). At the halfway mark, the drums enter with hits on the bass drum and a tom, playing in a rhythm that sounds somewhat like a calm and slow heartbeat. As the vocals once again grow in intensity, the drums lead the song into a loud crescendo, which creates a sonic image of a jar crashing to the ground. Just as the song finishes, the silence is relieved by a small electronic pulse, leading seamlessly into the following song.

*A Broken Jar* uses prosody and figurative language to great effect, and the lyrics read like a poem as soon as it is taken out of their musical context. This makes sense as the narrator himself considers his words to be literature and not song by asking “which voice is this than that I am writing in?” (0’48”). Although it does not follow a rhyme scheme, there is

a lot of assonance, consonance, repetition, and even a few rhymes that provide a structure and form that follows the musical rhythm closely.

The two words “one last...” are repeated at the beginning of the first and second verse, which underlines that we are approaching the end of the album. The words “losing”, “no one”, “blurry/blurrier” and “I don’t know” are repeated as well, and the negative and pessimistic charge of these words informs the listener that the narrator is still in a dark place. The narrator uses irony as he refers to his story as a comedy (1’12”), which indicates that the narrator, while depressed, acknowledges the absurdity of his mental state when compared to what others have gone through.

The first quatrain of the second verse is the only place in the song where we have full rhymes coupled with assonance on the close and near close front vowels /i:/ and /i/. The first verse teases this with assonance in the line “**It’s a mystery, I guess. Self-made secrecy**”, and the following lines in the words “cloudy”, “stories”, “blurry”, “minute” and “blurrier”. There is also assonance on the vowels /ɜ:/ and /ʌ/ in the first verse on the words “struggle”, “**undercurrent**”, “blurry” and “blurrier”. In the second verse, this assonance is more structured, with end rhymes on the words “plea”, “accompany”, “comedy”, “completely”, “sanity” and “me”.

As is the case in the other monologues, although to a lesser degree in *a Poem*, there is assonance on the diphthong /aɪ/ because of the repeated use of the pronoun “I”, which is coupled with the word “trying” towards the end of the second verse. The last verse contains assonance on the vowels /ɜ:/, /ʌ/, and /æ/, coupled with alliteration on /f/ and /k/ in the lines “discarding every **f**ragment, and **f**umbling **u**ncertain towards a **c**urtain **c**all that no one wants to **h**appen, that no one’s gonna **c**lap for **a**t all, **b**ut that still **h**as to be”. There are instances of alliteration in the first and second verses as well, with the words “self-made secrecy” coupled with “stories and the struggle”, as well as “I **k**now I **k**nocked” and “**f**abricated, **f**ashioned” in the second verse.

The name of the song is a reference to the novel “The Shape of a Pocket” by John Berger, in which a broken jar is used as an image of when you try to mend something that is broken, but the damage is still visible (Pedulla, 2012, 66’45”). This, of course, works as a metaphor for the narrator’s mental state after his loss, which is emphasized in the line where the narrator yells that “I know I knocked the table over, because I watched the jar break and I’ve been trying to repair it every single stupid day but won’t the cracks still show no matter

how well it's assembled" (1'23"), coupled with "every single narrative below reflects that moment when it broke and will I ever let it go no matter what?"

This metaphor is also used at the end of the song, as the narrator reaches a conclusion regarding how he must respond to his issues. The line "Now I am throwing all the shards away, discarding every fragment" (1'49") indicates that while he is still hurting, it is better to move on than to dwell on what could have been. Now, he is "fumbling uncertain towards a curtain call that no one wants to happen", which is a continuation of the previously mentioned use of comedy as an ironic metaphor for his issues.

Although the location is undisclosed, the song is similar to the other monologues in both delivery and implied setting. The first line – "one last letter now" – links it to both *a Departure* and *a Poem*, in which the narrator opens with a reference to him writing. You get a sense that he is still at the same place, both physically and mentally, but now he is starting to question his own reliability as well as sanity, asking questions that are self-reflective rather than placing blame elsewhere.

This is also the song in which the line between the narrator and focalizer is questioned by the narrator himself, as he is asking whether there has "ever been a difference between them at all" (0'54"). While he does not conclude, and states that "I don't know", we can to some extent acknowledge that the stories and narratives that have been framed through a focalizer are in fact told by a single individual. This narrative tool has been effective in that it has allowed the story to be told from several perspectives and allowed the narrator to place himself in different shoes and look at his struggles from a critical perspective.

*A Broken Jar* is a series of self-reflective questions tied to the nature of the narrative and stories, his mental state, the basis for his issues, and what he can do to move on. He is struggling to understand what he has been trying to accomplish, but he decides that the best thing he can do is move on, and although he is unsure as to what lies ahead of him, he realizes that it is the only option he has left.

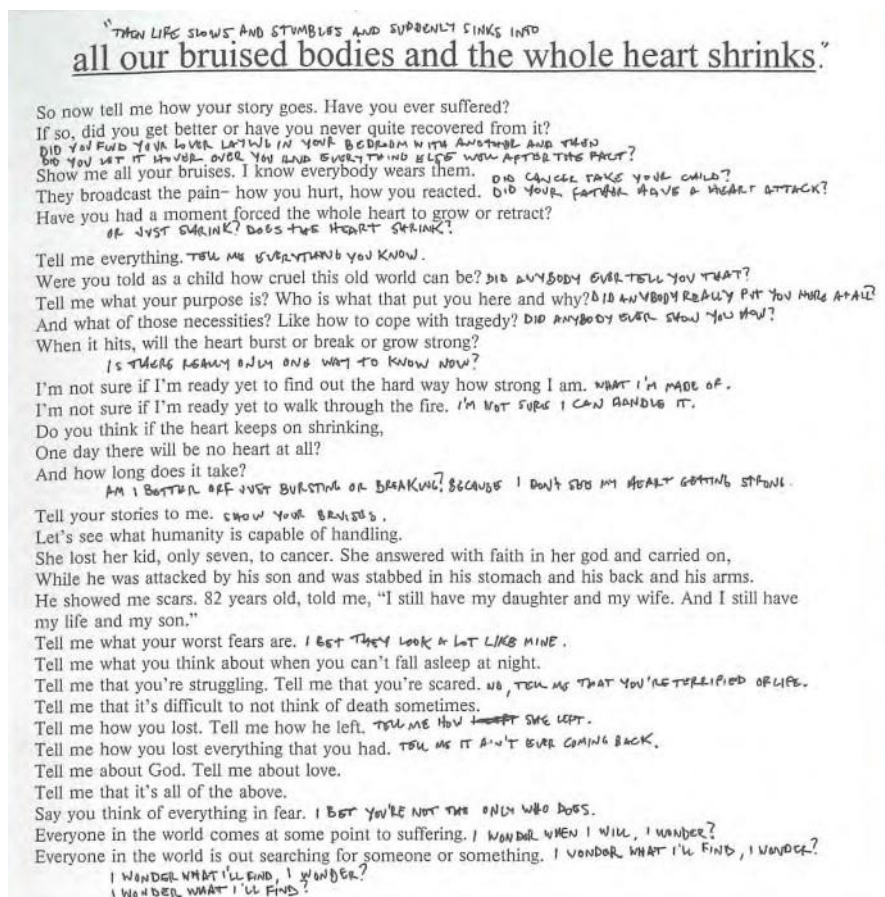


Figure 14 - All Our Bruised Bodies and the Whole Heart Shrinks

The penultimate song on *Wildlife* is a summary of the entire album, and the one that establishes what I take to be the main theme: “Everyone in the world comes at some point to suffering. I wonder when I will, I wonder?” (4’01”). This album has until now read like a lamentation from the narrator. He is struggling with mental issues, but when faced with “real” issues, like the death of loved ones, his anxiety seems trivial. The theme of this song is in part hope, but also dread; if he has still not experienced suffering, how will he ever be able to cope when it eventually hits?

The pulse that started playing at the end of *a Broken Jar* is quickly doubled by a guitar playing the same note and rhythm, which together fades further and further into the background as the other instruments in the first verse steadily increase in volume. After a small break, as the narrator asks “does the heart shrink?” (1’10”), *All our bruised bodies and the whole heart shrinks* enters a cacophonous and angry verse, filled with controlled feedback, shrieking guitars, and heavy drums playing several drum breaks to pull the music forward. The noise is soon relieved by a melody that invokes a much-needed sense of calm and comfort. The music is still loud and angry, but it goes from a chaotic and hurtful feeling of disorder to a feeling nearing order. This section reaches a climax as the narrator references

some of the people we got to know in the previous songs, before a short drum break leads into a groovy but harmonically sparse verse, where the bass and drums drive the music towards the song's conclusion. The musical motif that followed the cacophonous verse reappears and helps accentuate the narrative climax, as the narrator wonders when it is his turn to experience suffering. After one last desperate yell from Dreyer, screaming "I wonder what I'll find" (4'57"), the song goes quiet and leads directly into the album's finale.

The time and place of this discussion are not disclosed, and the song reads like a fast-paced back-and-forth rant between the narrator and the focalizer. The voices are impossible to set apart without the libretto, which emphasizes that the distinction between the two voices we have become acquainted with is blurred. There is a purpose to the voices, however, as well as a few hints with regard to the initial loss and the reason behind the overarching conflict.

The first question from the focalizer to the narrator is "have you ever suffered?", to which the narrator answers with another question, asking if he has ever "found your lover in your bedroom with another and then let it hover over you way after the fact?" (0'38"). This quip comeback reads like a snarky excuse from the narrator, as he for the first time alludes to the root of his problem – the thing itself. The rest of the song feels like the narrator and focalizer are turning their attention and wonder to the listener, begging *you* to understand and relate to them. Both voices command someone to "tell me everything" (1'14"), and "tell your stories to me. Show your bruises" (2'40"). This could indicate that they speak to each other, but the tempo of the vocals makes it feel more like they are making a desperate plea to a third party – the listener.

The line "did your father have a heart attack" (1'00") is also one that stands out, as there has been no reference to a heart attack in any previous song. This might indicate that the narrator has lost his father to a heart attack, or it could be a reference to *Edward Benz, 27 Times*, with the heart attack being a metaphor for Edward being stabbed by his son. As the line follows "did cancer take your child", which of course is a reference to *I See Everything*, and in the context of the other songs of the album, this makes more sense.

The rhythm of the music is closely followed by the vocals throughout the song, and the use of repetition, rhyme, and assonance is vital to this flow, although it is written in free verse. The internal rhyme of "lover" and "hover" in the first verse is important, as it makes a central plot point stand out, and gives context to the overarching narrative. The repetition of "tell me everything", "did anybody...", and "I'm not sure", lays the foundation for the rumination and wondering that the narrator goes through, and drives home the point that he is



desperate for answers. The series of questions – rhetorical and otherwise – eventually evolves into commands. The narrator is begging someone, probably the recipient of the letters, to tell him about events that have happened to this person. He needs to know there is someone who can relate to his issues, so he knows that he is not alone in the world. The present is scary, but the future is even scarier, and while it is difficult to “walk through the fire” (2’10”), there is acceptance and resignation in his voice.

The intensity in the delivery of these commands is made all the more potent by the frequent repetition of “tell me...”, which creates a red thread in the song by reusing this phrase from a previous verse. The central motif in the song, however, is the “heart”. The already poetic title is even more poetic in the libretto, where the extended title reads “Then life slows and stumbles and suddenly sink into all our bruised bodies and the whole heart shrinks”. On the surface, this title seems quite nonsensical, but the lines “have you had a moment forced the whole heart to grow or retract? Or just shrink, just the heart shrink?” (1’04”), and “Do you think if the heart keeps on shrinking one day there will be no heart at all?” (2’20) add some clarity and context. The narrator is heartbroken, and although he wonders if his condition can make him and his heart stronger and more resilient, he is worried that it will get broken beyond repair: “Because I don’t see my heart getting strong” (2’36”).

You just go through life, where everything is fine. You have a partner whom you love, but then life takes a left turn. Your partner leaves you for someone else, shattering your idea of what the future would bring, leaving you heartbroken and desolate, wondering what more cruel and hurtful events might come next. The narrator is stuck in a rut, and while his lamentation and rumination have left him in an even deeper hole, there is nothing left to do but to embrace whatever curveball life throws at him next.

## You and I in Unison

What will I find?  
Some sacred thing to help me handle the tragedy?  
Or did I once—Did I have it and lose it?

No one should ever have to walk through the fire alone.  
No one should ever have to brave that storm. No,  
Everybody needs someone or something.

And when I sing, don't I sing your name out  
Right at the same time that I sing my own?

SOME DAYS I SWEAR I CAN FEEL YOU SLIPPING LIKE LIGHT THROUGH THE WINDOW FRAME  
THE GATES IT MAKES ARE ALWAYS WARMER, ALWAYS BRIGHTER THAN THE REST OF WHAT COMES THROUGH.

SOME DAYS I SWEAR I CAN HEAR YOU SING TO ME OR WHISPER MY NAME IN THE SILENT WAY,  
LIKE THE WINDMILL LIGHT NOW Laid ACROSS MY BEDROOM FLOOR IS SOMEHOW ACTUALLY YOU  
AND NOT JUST SUNLIGHT.

I HAVE THE MENTAL CLIMB DOWN THE BALCONY.  
I PUT A FLOWER ON THE BACK OF MY DRESS.  
IT'S PROBABLY BEST TO FORGET IT.

I FEEL AT THE STAIRS BE WHERE THE SKIN AND THE LIP MEET  
ONLY A MOMENT AFTER BEHIND THE KISS AND  
I BLUR OUT EVERYTHING ELSE.  
THAT'S HOW I CHOOSE TO REMEMBER IT.

SOME NIGHTS ARE A LOT LIKE THE DAYS. I LAY AWAKE TOO LATE, AND WATCH THE  
SHADOWS CASTED TRENCH YOUR SHAPE. THESE SILENT SLIVERS ON THE WALLS TRIP ON THE  
BEDSHOOTS. I HEAR YOUR VOICE IN THE TREES. I FINALLY FEEL THE RISE.

SOME NIGHTS WHEN I'M SLEEPING YOU SHOW UP IN MY DREAMS. JUST BARE STAMPE  
THINGS LIKE BURNING SMOGGLIES, AND WHEN I WAKE UP I COULD SWEAR YOU MUST'VE JUST LEFT  
ME. LIKE YOU GOT UP TO GET BREAKFAST OR MAYBE JUST TO GET DRESSED.

BUT THE POINT IS, YOU WERE NEVER THERE. AND YOU WON'T EVER BE.  
SOMETIMES I THINK I'M NOT EITHER, SO WHAT DO I DO?  
WHEN EVERY DAY STILL FEELS TO START AND END WITH YOU?

AND YOU WON'T EVER KNOW, YOU WON'T EVER SEE,  
HOW MUCH YOU'VE GOTTEN SINCE THEN HAS BEEN DEFINING ME.

I LEAVE THE MEMENTO UP ATOP THE BALCONY.  
I TUCK THIS FLOWER FROM THE BACK OF THE DRESS.  
IT'S BEST THIS TIME, I BET TO JUST FORGET AND LET GO.  
PAINT IT THE SHADE OF WHERE THE LIP BLOWS AND GUILT IT OUT.  
I BLUR OUT EVERYTHING ELSE,  
JUST BLUR OUT EVERYTHING ELSE.  
AND LET GO,  
AND LET GO.

EVERYBODY HAS TO GET GO SOMEWAY, EVERYBODY HAS TO LET GO. I UNDERSTAND I WILL?  
I WONDER?

BUT IF I DON'T FEEL YOU CHANGE IN EVERY CITY I MEET,  
MAYBE YOU'VE BEEN HERE, BUT I'VE BEEN HERE? IF YOU'VE BEEN HERE WITH THE DAYS,  
YOU'VE GOTTEN STILL WANTING ME? THEN SHOULD I NOT JUST SING ALONG?

I WILL SING SURELY AND HOPE THAT THE NOTES CHANGE BUT  
I DO NOT NEED IT TO HAPPEN, I'M NOT RESIGNED TO IT. AND  
IF THEY NEVER CHANGE I'LL SING YOUR NAME IN EVERY LINE.  
JUST LIKE I DID THROUGHOUT THIS, JUST LIKE I'VE ALWAYS DONE.  
IN EVERY CITY, THE EMPTY CHECK, AND OVERLY TIGHTER BOND.  
IN THE THOSE SING UP, IN ALL THESE GIVINGS IN.

UNTIL I DIE I WILL SING OUR NAMES IN UNISON.  
UNTIL I DIE I WILL SING OUR NAMES IN UNISON.

Figure 15 - *You and I in Unison*

The album's closing track is the song where the narrator finds peace. The song begins where the previous ends, asking "what will I find?" (0'14"). The future is not written, and the past will not be forgotten, so what will the future bring? The uncertainty is difficult to handle, but there is no way around it: One must embrace it. The narrator realizes this, and while he understands that he is unable to detach himself from the past, he must use this experience for something productive and move on with his life.

*You and I in Unison* enters with a slow-paced and calm guitar riff accentuated by the drums. While the song's intro is a slow burn, the tempo is doubled in the second verse, moving both the song and the narrative in a more hopeful direction. Musically, this song is divided into eight parts plus an outro. While the parts differ in length, intensity, instrumentation, melody, and rhythm, the vocals are consistently intense throughout the song. Following the second verse, the drums start playing a simple rudiment on the snare drum as the volume and intensity is lowered, staging a scene where the narrator is reminiscing about a good memory. The song then moves to a section with a groove that builds up towards a release. After a short break, where the guitars are panned from right to left as a quick palate cleanser, the buildup enters a crescendo, where all instruments come together in a coherent 4/4-rhythm, and where the guitars play a light melody that fades down to a staccato beat. While the bass and drums continue to drive the song forward, the guitars supplement the sound with some bent and shrieking notes, adding some texture and color to the soundscape. The seventh part is a hard build, which leads into a crescendo and climax, until Dreyer finally screams out the album's final statement: "Until I die I will sing our names in unison!"

(3'57"). As this phrase is repeated, the soundscape starts to dissolve, with dissonance, a loss of tempo, and feedback. One single guitar closes the album with an ominous melody while the other guitars feedback, stopping on a note that leaves the melody unresolved.

Except for in one stanza, there is no set rhyme scheme in *You and I in Unison*. It does however contain both assonance and consonance, on top of a lot of repetition and a rich figurative language. The rhyme scheme comes in as the song reaches the musical and narrative climax, where the narrator yells "But the truth is, you were never there, you will never be" (2'21"). The stanza follows an ABBAA-pattern (be // do // you // see // me), which helps the climax stand out, and underlines the narrator's realization. A single end rhyme is also coupled with assonance and consonance in the introduction, where it brings color and musical effect that together with the music underlines the shift in both narrative and performance.

"**No one should** ever have to **walk** through the fire **alone**. **No one should** ever have to brave that **storm**. **No**, everybody, needs **someone or something**, and **when** I sing, don't I sing your name out, right at the **same time**, as I sing my **own**" (0'29").

The frequent use of repetition is often used to underline a reference to another song or event, and sometimes just to give the language flow and color. The two first stanzas of the second part repeat the phrase "Some days I swear I can feel/hear you" (0'58" - 1'11"), before this motif returns at the start of the fourth stanza of the second part ("some nights are a lot like the days" 1'52"). The third stanza of the second part, however, is mirrored in the third part's second stanza. In the second part of this stanza, he states: "I have the memory climb down the balcony, I put a flower on the back of its dress. It's probably best to forget it. [...] I paint it the shade of where the skin and the lip meet [...] I blur out everything else" (1'25"), and in the third part, he inverts it and says "I leave the memory up atop at the balcony, I tear this flower from the back of the dress. It's best this time to just forget and let go. Paint it the shade of where the lip bleeds and blur it out" (2'39"). At first, he remembers the past fondly, and while he acknowledges that it is best to let it go, he isolates this memory, and clings to the thing that has broken him. He then comes to a new realization, and it seems like he can let go. And although he understands that he is not yet able to move on completely, the mere idea that he probably will at some point is enough.

The figurative language romanticizes the narrator's past, but also blurs out any concrete conclusion. There are a lot of metaphors in use, first in the lines "...walk through the fire alone" and "brave that storm". These are metaphors for any issues or problems a human might face in life, and an acknowledgment that he needs help. The recurring motif of "singing", especially the line "But if I still hear you singing in every city I meet" (3'20") is a call back to *Harder Harmonies*, where the narrator and focalizer use melody and song as a metaphor for his struggles to adapt to his surroundings. In this song, however, the metaphor is more specific, alluding to the memory of his former partner rather than society in general.

Another metaphor is in the phrase "how much your ghost since then has been defining me" (2'37"). Instead of using the word "haunting", which would be quite natural in this context, he uses the word "defining". This suggests that, while he has been haunted in terms of his mental health, her effect on him goes beyond that. It has become a part of him and his identity. As this is the case, his conclusion makes sense, as a loss – either in death or in a breakup – will never not have happened, and so simply forgetting is not a good coping mechanism. She is a part of him, and he will remember her until he dies.

The song contains some descriptions of settings and locations, and while they are not temporally anchored, it grounds the events and emotions that are conveyed by the narrator. The phrase "Some days I swear I can feel you splitting the light through the window frame" (0'58") places the events in a sunlit room, and provides a feeling of warmth and happiness as the narrator imagines his former partner's silhouette in front of the window. The location becomes even more expanded as the motif of the bedroom becomes apparent. "The warmest light now laid across my bedroom floor", and "Those silver slivers on the wall then on the bedsheets", both indicate that the relationship that has ended was physical and intimate, and judging by the mark it has left on the narrator, very intense.

The events of *You and I in Unison* are all about the narrator imagining his former partner in a bittersweet past. While the memories are warm and pleasant, he understands that this is a false comfort, and it is time to "forget and let go" (1'31"). However, as he is approaching a clear break from his past, he flips the script again. "Everybody has to let go – I wonder when I will" (3'10"). The song – and the album – ends as the narrator moves past his need to forget about the past and embraces the fact that it is a part of him.

Although the libretto suggests that the introduction is written from the perspective of a focalizer, the use of first-person singular pronoun indicates that it is the narrator's voice. The visual distinction seems to be more of an aesthetic choice than a clear divide between the

voices and completes the gradual merge that has been happening throughout the album. The focalizer and narrator are now one and the same, which symbolizes that the narrator has reached a point where he is able to move on; his mind was split, but now he is able to reconcile his emotions. “I will sing sweetly hope the notes change but I do not need it to happen, I’m not resigned to it” (3’36”).

The most concrete proof that the voices are blending is in the final phrase of the song’s introduction: “And when I sing, don’t I sing your name out right at the same time that I sing my own?” (0’42”). While the object of the sentence (“your”) is the former partner, the context provided by the previous songs can suggest that he is referring to a focalizer. As the font in the libretto changes to handwriting at this point, it suggests that the narrator is able to claim his own story and not hide behind a persona. Furthermore, it confirms the meta-narrative, suggesting that this album chronicles the creation of the album itself, reaffirming its authenticity and creating a multi-layered narrative to which one can relate on different levels.

### **Summary and discussion**

While *A Broken Jar* is the final monologue on the album, the two following songs have more in common with this and the other three monologues than the story-centered songs. This narrative change is down to how the voices have gradually blended into each other, and the focus on the narrator’s development instead of his rumination about other people’s experiences. Not only do we learn more about the narrator’s motivations and the triggering event we know as a departure, but we also get a conclusion to the story, as the narrator has found hope through acceptance. There is no happy ending in which the narrator can leave his past behind, be happy, and walk through life without concern, but that is a reflection of life itself.

The music in this section does not divert from the established sound of the record, but there is a sense that these songs are linked in a closer way than what has been the case in previous sections. First through the “electric” pulse which creates a seamless transition between *a Broken Jar* and *All our bruised bodies and the whole heart shrinks*, and then in the phrase “what will I find” in *You and I in Unison*, which is a continuation from the previous song which ended with the phrase “I wonder what I’ll find”. This makes this section feel like one big summary and conclusion, rather than three individual songs that inform the narrative in separate ways.

As the ever-present meta-discourse was wrapped up in *You and I in Unison* by suggesting that the act of writing the record itself is a part of the story, the story is once again authenticated by a sense of realism. The meta-discourse does not manifest itself in a more concrete way than previously – it has been quite obvious from the beginning – but as the font changes in the libretto simultaneously as the rhythm of the song switches, the interplay with the narrator’s question feels like a conclusion to the meta-discourse.

I have established in previous chapters that “the thing itself” has been left ambiguous to create a space for the listener to relate to the narrative on different levels, but with that as an undercurrent, the second part of *You and I in Unison* all but confirms that it is, in fact, a former partner that is the cause of his issues. I have shown that this has been heavily hinted at throughout, but in this case, it is difficult to imagine that the subject of the song is any other person than his former partner.

## Conclusion

This thesis has discussed La Dispute’s concept album *Wildlife* from 2011. By analyzing every song by looking at the performance and the narrative from a theoretical standpoint, I have created a framework that enables me to answer my research question. The theoretical framework has been informed by narrative theory, which has been applied to the discursive genre of the concept album. The analysis of the performance has revolved around questions regarding performativity, authenticity, poetry, and musical structures. The musical genre of post-hardcore is the backdrop of the performance, which means that any questions of quality are tied to how this album exists in this context.

The method of my analysis has been close reading and close listening, which has enabled me to engage with the performance and narrative as two sides of the same coin, which works together to create a unified whole. While some phrases and melodies might evoke different emotions and feelings in different people, I have provided one example of how one might apply theory to analyze a concept album as something more than just a collection of songs.

Throughout *Wildlife*, the narrative has revolved around the narrator’s search for meaning, hope, guidance, and acceptance, all in the aftermath of a breakup. While he is clearly hurting,

he does struggle to understand why something that can seem so trivial can affect him as deeply as it has. There are people who suffer real tragedy, facing death and violence, making him wonder how he will be able to cope with a scenario of this magnitude in the future. Anxiety and depression ride the narrator like a mare, with all his worry and wonder creating a vicious circle that seems impossible to escape. He tries to go through an “exorcism” by writing down his issues and qualms in letters to his former partner. This evolves into an attempt to find a way to cope: Either by running away from the problems, immersing himself in the problems, or having casual sex. These meditative ruminations are not enough to make him commit to a solution, making him search for a distraction. After telling three stories of people affected by murder, violence, and death, the narrator asks when he will find someone to share his life with, and when he will personally experience “real” suffering.

The first section of songs on *Wildlife* establishes the narrative, its central conflict, and the protagonist. While the settings and locations are given, they are not vividly described, giving more weight to the events happening inside the narrator’s head rather than in his surroundings. This not only makes the listener sympathize with the narrator, but allows the listener to place him- or herself in his shoes. The events are quite clearly described, but also ambiguous enough for listeners to draw a different meaning than what Dreyer might have intended. All of this is done with intention, and while there is a short way from ambiguity to inauthenticity, the meta-narrative, the quality of the performance, the seriousness of the discourse, and the inclusion of biographical elements make these songs feel sincere, authentic, and relatable.

The narrator’s attempts at coping with abandonment are described in songs that have a similar musical feel and poetic structures as the first section of songs, and the narrative reads like a direct continuation of what the previous section proposed. *A Letter* introduces the section with a discourse and literary tools that we know from *a Departure*, creating a red thread in both performance and narrative. The proposed solutions of escapism, immersion, and intimacy can be understood by most, and is relatable to many, which continues the theme of making the songs narratively diffuse so that people from different walks of life can relate to them. The narrative and performance are authenticated by the poetic and emotional descriptions of events, the way the narrator imagines himself in the stories, the instrumentation that reflects the feelings conveyed in the lyrics, as well as an intense yet dynamic vocal performance.

As the narrator attempts to distract himself by dwelling on tragedy, the lyrics take a more prosaic turn, with a directness of discourse that leaves little to the imagination. The narrator is still imagining himself in scenarios, but in a more concrete manner, as he states his intentions and actions. The meta-discourse that has been established is also more concrete in this section than in the previous, as the narrator places himself in the same space as was established in the first section, and by speaking of events that are certifiably true. The performance is highly dynamic, with the loud and quiet parts making each other stand out, and with poetic techniques that strengthen the story by being used more selectively.

The fourth and last section concludes the story and the meta-discourse that has been established in the monologues, summarizes the stories, and shows how these have affected the narrator. There are no new stories told, but the final song of the album provides closure as the narrator reaches a point of acceptance, although there is still uncertainty tied to his mental health. It is also all but confirmed that the initial “departure”, the event that set the narrative in motion, is indeed an ended relationship. The songs segue into each other, creating a sense that these songs are all vital to the conclusion. In the transition from the first to the second part of *You and I in Unison* the visual aspect of the font changes in a manner that proposes that the narrator is embracing the uncertainty without hiding behind a persona. The idea that the narrator is a persona of Jordan Dreyer’s would in that case authenticate the narrative through this meta-discourse, which has been looming throughout the album.

By being as linear as it is, the narrative is a huge part of how the musical performance is framed. First by creating a space in which the songs become more meaningful by being listened to in the proper order and context, and second by telling emotional stories that are both direct and diffuse, letting the listener connect to the stories on different levels. The way the stories have been told from different perspectives and voices has not only worked to enable this aspect, but also informed the meta-discourse, which has strengthened the sense of authenticity. The poetic aspect has also strengthened the narrative and the performance. Both by making the stories easier to follow in the context of the music and by making certain aspects of the stories stand out in the narrative.

Besides the meta-discourse and the different voices, the album has also been authenticated by the narrative’s use of real and realistic events. Even in songs that use fiction, such as *Harder Harmonies*, *St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church Blues*, and *The Most Beautiful Bitter Fruit*, there are elements of reality present, and there are no events that occur



that the listener would point to as being nonsensical or unrealistic. The most important songs that iterate the realism of the album is the section about death, however. This is where most listeners find themselves moved by the narrative, and is the section which the rest of the narrative revolves around. The use of different voices and meta-discourse in the other songs creates a sense of authenticity on the record as a whole, but is just as vital in that it creates a narrative in which the three stories from Dreyer's life are told most effectively.

While the vocals are an acquired taste – they certainly are performative and theatrical in a manner that is off-putting to many – their plaintive and intense nature does induce a sense of sincerity and sympathy towards the narrator. Not only do the vocals create a unique sound – they also authenticate the story by being as dramatic and intense as they are; this is Dreyer's voice, and these are his words, suggesting that there is no one else that can tell his story in an authentic manner. There might be vocalists that can perform the lyrics in a way that is more appealing to the masses, but by virtue of being the one who has experienced the events and emotions that lead to the creation of this album, this makes the act of listening to the album more special.

*Wildlife* ends as it began, with a single guitar playing an ominous melody, showing that while a change has taken place, the narrator is still the same man with many of the same problems. In between these melodies, the music has provided harmony, dissonance, noise, silence, sadness, and joy, which are all feelings conveyed through the lyrics. By utilizing the possibilities given by the concept album format, La Dispute has staged a narrative and used a platform that enables them to not only tell a story, but also evoke a strong sense of emotion in the listener through the interplay of poetry, narrative, and music. While the music may not be to everyone's liking, the true stories, the meta-discourse, the structure, and the intense vocals all work to authenticate the story and the album, creating a strong sense of understanding and empathy for the ones that bother to look beyond the surface.

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