



ALEC QUIG
COLLEGE
WRITING

Essays & Poems
2004-2008

Preface

This is a collection of sketches. The material herein is the product of my beginning to learn how to write. As such, most of the essays veer between harsh and hagiographic. They, and the poems, are simply practice for what I hope are greater things to come. I collected them together to bring closure to my years of school, put the past behind me, and move vigilantly towards the future.

Most of the poems were written in South Bend when I was between the ages of 18 and 20, almost universally in spring or early summer. The longer music pieces were written in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn, in the summer of 2007. The shorter music and film pieces were written for the Indiana Daily Student in winter 2008, during my final semester of college.

There are numerous pieces that were not evolved enough to include: short stories, poems, articles for the South Bend Tribune, and finally, essays in music (Brian Eno, Wilco, Lil' Wayne, Outkast, Madlib, Ravel, Mahler, Thelonious Monk, Lilys, Enon, Harry Nilsson, Gilberto Gil, Jorge Ben, and other albums), film (Kon Ichikawa, Pedro Almodóvar, David Lynch, Woody Allen, Quentin Tarantino, and other films), art (Willem de Kooning, Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Neo Rausch, David

Hockney, Jeff Wall, Robert Rauschenberg, James Turrell, Gregory Crewdson, Lucas Samaras, John Baldessari, Robert Frank, Alex Webb), writing (Robert Hayden, Tu Fu, John Updike, Raymond Carver, James Baldwin, Annie Proulx). Therefore, this book could see further editions with additional and revised content.

I hope you enjoy these early examples of my writing.

- AQ
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College Writing

Essays

12 Rods: *Split Personalities*

After time dissolves the rational, chronological order of the past, years later we can still remember the poignant, best, strangest, inexplicable in-between moments we all have when growing up, almost as if they happened to someone else: unexpected dates when everything clicked, the weather, the people, the mood, the breeze. If you hear it at the right time, the music on this album seeps between the cracks of those experiences, good and bad, and cements them in memory. This music is a soundtrack for bliss just as much as it is for frightening times of transition and uncertainty, contemplating the past, present, and future, figuring out where the hell you are, what the hell you're doing, what the hell you're feeling. In 1998, 12 Rods created the ideal musical backdrop for adolescence.

The only time to hear this album is between the ages of 16 and 20. Its significance is usually lost on folks otherwise. *Split Personalities* seems too-adolescent to people who have already grown up, and overwhelming to those who have not yet begun. Though many factors contributed 12 Rods' relative lack of mainstream acceptance, this particular quandary is the one of the main ones – the audience for this album is small, transient, and fickle. Marketing this album is like trying to sell to caterpillars in cocoons. *Split Personalities*' greatest strength and weakness is a paradox: it's timeless music that only applies to a

certain time of life. It has to fall into your hands and ears at the right time.

How does an album become a larger-than-life, indispensable element in an inescapably transformative period of life? In short, the answer is exuberance. There's a heartbreakingly palpable sense, from start to finish, that this band knows that their moment has arrived. Legend has it that these guys got together in the interim between high school and college to fully craft these songs. The performances are strangely, precociously immaculate. They are not merely perfect, but of a kind of quality we expect only from immortal, seemingly-superhuman rock bands in their mature periods. The effect this produces is disorienting. 12 Rods are clearly the weird music dorks that you went to high school with, not Keith Richards and Mick Jagger. These are the songs that immensely talented kids fresh out high school graduation would write, but they're played with shocking maturity.

12 Rods more than stepped up to the plate when their chance came, but the public response to their efforts came nowhere near their expectations. So, *Split Personalities* has become a cult album, bolstered by the group's preceding EP earning a 10.0 rating on Pitchfork. It's a cult album for the same reasons that it never truly succeeded commercially: *Split Personalities* exudes sometimes uncomfortably raw honesty, and people tend to react to this with either love, hate, or indifference. In recounting an awkward

teenage homosexual encounter, “I Wish You Were A Girl” is black comedy that manages to feel both musically transcendent and profoundly unsettling. This kind of honesty does not slip through the cracks and onto the radio, and is not background music in any sense – the force of its sincerity is too powerful.

Frontman Ryan Olcott is a archetypal unlikely protagonist: a slightly awkward, insecure, confused, sensitive teenager whose world seems to get more emotionally threatening and alien by the day. His lyrics can produce the same jolt of discomfort that springs from reading high school diaries. *Split Personalities* was clearly born from the catharsis and melodramatic trauma that most everyone goes through in high school, and is easy to latch on to because many can relate. The strange but understandable popularity of emo has caused us to be suspicious of this brand of emoting, but the key to this album’s sustained credibility is its very avoidance of indulgence and gratuitousness. And there’s an edge and viciousness in Olcott’s self-hatred that makes us listen to him. Like high school and adolescence itself, this album is in some parts desperate and pitiful, but it’s even more transcendent and meaningful.

Like the kids sitting at the outcast table in the high school cafeteria, the album’s gift and curse is its idiosyncrasy. Because it had nothing to do with the deliberately sloppy, irreverent indie-pop that was in vogue during the 90’s, it has both held up

well and fell between the cracks. While their peers feigned artlessness, 12 Rods had no qualms about being skilled musicians. When irony was in vogue, the band took themselves utterly, endearingly seriously. Though this album sounds very much of the 1990's, its sonic character isn't easily compared with anything contemporaneous. These sounds seem conjured directly from life, laying in the beds of their parents' homes dreaming about the future.

The band's unreleased material and B-sides reveal their initial influences (My Bloody Valentine, some garage and surf rock), but this crystal-clear sounding album bears shockingly little resemblance to their early reverb-soaked demos. It seems as if extraneous influences were simply wrung out. The leap in quality and originality from the group's first two self-released demo albums to *Split Personalities* is among the most extraordinary I've ever heard. Evidently, something magical happened in the studio, and everything just clicked. This unexpected explosion of quality is so surprising because many of these songs had slowly been in the works for years. This album could have only resulted from years of glacial, incremental refinement, both on the live stage and in the brains of the musicians.

And it's so simple. This is a band of three and a half instruments: guitar, bass, drums, and some background keyboards. Their formula is simple: well-structured chords, inventive drumming, and a bassist who unassumingly supports the other

musicians in the classic rock sense. Few albums of comparable quality and simplicity have been released since, and it could have only come from the Midwest. The music of the eastern, western, and southern regions of the United States are relatively simple for most to characterize. Culturally, the Midwest is in a perpetual identity crisis. There are few bona-fide movements here. In turn, there is nothing necessarily fashionable, hip, or innovative about this album. It may be most remarkable for its complete lack of affect. Bands in the Midwest rarely achieve distinction through being different. If anything defines their music, it's sincerity, and this album exudes it. When people identify with Midwestern bands, it's when the sound of their music somehow conveys that they mean it more, and in 1998, it would be hard to find anyone who meant it more than 12 Rods.

Intangibly, this music epitomizes the silent resolve with which Midwesterners steadfastly move through the dark and harsh winters, heat blasting from the vents as they fly through pancake-flat interstates in filthy, salt-covered cars. But *Split Personalities* is not mere winter music. The album is perhaps an even more appropriate soundtrack for the end-of-hibernation feeling that marks a Midwestern spring, and later, the late time of day when it's cool enough to go outside in the summer. Somehow, the Midwestern awareness of the cyclical, seasonal, inconsistent nature of

everything in life—tension, release, and the patience required to cope with it all—permeates the brief silences in these songs. I've tried listening to this while going to sleep numerous times. They don't let you sleep, and I'm not alone here. For many, this is not only an album, but a highlight reel that replays the most transformative events from the final years of youth. This album is a magnet for strange pockets of the past, moments of transition, and feelings that you can't help. I hope that fifty years from now, kids with fresh drivers licenses still find *Split Personalities* laying around—maybe they'll need a soundtrack, too.

Arcade Fire: *Neon Bible*

The era of the mp3 has created unprecedented access to all of music history, an uncommonly saturated talent pool, and an unprecedented quantity of references influencing the songwriting process. To cope with this, some artists appropriate as much of music history as they can and throw it all together. Others find ways to innovate and still sound fresh despite the deluge of different music now available to us through our computers. Others find a slice of time in the past which they connect with the most, and try to operate in that channel. The Arcade Fire joins the latter group. Rather than creating a sound to characterize the mp3 era, they retreat to another that's become simpler and more-comprehensible with age.

Neon Bible mostly ignores the last two decades, blocks out diverse influences, and fashions itself as a classic rock album with modern themes. Classic rock is named as such for a reason. It represents the maturation of the record industry and studio system, as well the pop album as a coherent artistic statement. *Neon Bible* is a textbook classic rock album, supposedly modeled loosely after Springsteen's quintessential classic rock album, *Born to Run*. Though we have much to learn from it, and even more cause for lamenting its passing, the classical period of rock is long gone. In light of this, The Arcade Fire's latest offering is a bit of an anachronism.

The bar is being raised in indie rock. This arises through a feedback loop consisting of the slow death of the old world music industry at the hands of the internet, cheap recording equipment, and the genre's wider commercial appeal. The Arcade Fire is on the crest of this wave, and they evidence how the stereotype has evolved. In 1995, the indie archetype was a penniless slacker. 2005's indie musician operates a home studio, markets on MySpace, and even earns middle-class income. The Arcade Fire are today's rock archetype. What separates them from your average millennial home-studio band is seriousness, maturity, hard work, dedication, and most significantly, good producers and engineers. Neon Bible will be well-regarded by fans of the genre, many of whom are dabbler musicians themselves, in part because it represents the paramount culmination of their indie rock aspirations.

In presenting energetic songs that aren't dumbed-down, Neon Bible fills market demand in a pretty grand way, but its most successful and enjoyable songs sound like classic or indie rock covers. "Keep the Car Running" sounds like Springsteen. "Ocean of Noise" recalls Orbison. "The Well and the Lighthouse" is post-9/11 Echo & The Bunnymen. Enduring artists transcend the zeitgeist, and in doing so, define it. Instead of aspiring to transcend the achievements of their predecessors and peers alike, Neon Bible offers modern approximations of a classic aesthetic.

Like the performance of cover band, these songs epitomize the familiar and aesthetically benign. It simply fails to bring anything new or fresh to the table. Some of these tracks are eminently likable, but with so much out there to listen to, the album gets buried in the onslaught of other releases. Frankly, I'm bewildered at all the hype. Unless the Arcade Fire have an escape plan, producing something truly worthy of all the attention should continue to elude them.

Jean-Luc Godard: *Pierrot Le Fou*

This week, The Criterion Collection released its own edition of *Pierrot le Fou* (*Pierrot the Fool*), a wonderful introduction to the world of French director Jean Luc Godard.

Godard's work is Miles Davis-like in breadth and re-invention. His breakthrough film, *Breathless*, ushered in the French New Wave and his own strongest "cinematic" period, an outburst of creativity and invention seven years long. *Breathless*' style broke dramatically from conventions – Godard shot it with handheld cameras in grainy black and white, made stars out of relatively unknown actors, and created a hit from a limited budget. It's said that of the few thousand who bought *The Velvet Underground* and Nico, all of them went out and started bands. In 1960, *Breathless* might have been the same way. Its rawness, immediacy, and irreverence make filmmaking seem effortless.

Years later, Godard's *Contempt* was *Breathless*' opposite: this time he shot in dazzling, super-widescreen Technicolor cinemascope, and cast as the lead actress worldwide phenomenon Brigitte Bardot, whose salary alone took up half of the film's budget. Compared to *Breathless*, *Contempt* is unnatural, complicated, and confusing, but makes an indelible effect. Few directors are capable of this range.

Pierrot is like the halfway point between these two films, a synthesis of Godard's strongest

period. It tells the story of a man going crazy in the provincial life he's found himself in, and his fateful, improbable exit from it. The protagonist, Ferdinand, is fed up with his marriage and middle-class life. On the way to a party that epitomizes everything he hates about his life, he meets Marianne, an old flame, who conveniently happens to be the babysitter that night. Old feelings are resurrected when driving her home, and before we know it, he wakes the next morning in her apartment. She's improbably caught up in a shady operation that smuggles guns to Africa, and Ferdinand gets dragged into the fray. Soon, Pierrot is a full-blown lovers on the run picture. After going on the lamb, the two live off their wits for a time in pastoral seaside France. The rest of the film involves unexpected duplicity and a cataclysmic, borderline-ridiculous ending that could only conclude a film by Godard.

What draws me to Godard's movies is how saturated they are with meaning. Everything seems to mean or refer to three things. He loved American culture, and found some way to pick up on and convey the spirit of the American zeitgeist—pop art, comics, film noir, jazz—despite being all the way across the Atlantic. His films have an unmistakable feeling of a single personality run wild. One gets the sense that these are the films that he wanted to make, producers, the public, the critics be damned. He has the awareness that our expectations of film must be challenged and expanded. Thus, repeated

viewings are more or less mandatory.

Following Godard's movies can be difficult because he doesn't get wrapped up in plot. He minimizes the inessential elements of his films--even if it means sacrificing narrative clarity--and focuses instead on their most emotionally potent moments. Ferdinand sums it up himself, wanting to "...not to write about people's lives anymore, but only about life itself. What lies in between people. Space, sound, and color." It's not that Godard tries to confuse us -- whenever something really important happens, he lavishes it with distinctive artistic touches. In one of the film's most beautiful scenes, fireworks explode overhead as Ferdinand and Marianne begin the slow ritual of their affair on that fateful drive home. The diffuse reflections of passing streetlights and fireworks through the windshield make streaks of color dance around the couple, and suddenly, we have the correct feeling that something's about to happen.

One minute, Godard is tampering with every sensory element in the film, and the next he doesn't interfere at all. Early on, Ferdinand's tedious relationship is fully conveyed in a single brief scene. Then, at the party where he finally snaps, people talk almost completely in advertising slogans. Godard tints different shots with color filters, accentuating just how screwed up that particular sect of humanity was. The director depicts things his way, with a succinctness and economy that creates the

necessary space for him to say so much.

Pierrot instantly becomes more poignant when we learn that its lead actress, Anna Karina, was Godard's wife. The director used many of his movies in part to make sense of his married relationship, one quickly and ultimately leading to divorce. Indeed, the film's central issue may be the difficulty of communication between men and women. He speaks in ideas, she in feelings. *Pierrot Le Fou* is a film rich in both.

Milton Nascimento & Lô Borges: *Clube da Esquina*

Milton Nascimento and Lô Borges' *Clube da Esquina* is widely and deservedly regarded as one of the best popular albums ever tilled from Brazilian soil. I like to liken it to a South American *Abbey Road*: the two came out in the same year, the Beatles were an obvious and important influence, and the two are similar in their giant scope. *Clube da Esquina* can be split into four distinct sections: an introductory section that preps the listener for the epic journey to follow, a second section where Borges and Nascimento display their raw songwriting chops, a third, climactic section where its immaculately sequenced songs are most diverse and transcendent, and a final and somewhat irresolute concluding section that contains the album's most experimental songs.

The opening track, "Tudo Que Você Podia Ser," is an anthemic statement of purpose and an introduction to the rich chords and sumptuous reverb that sonically characterize the album. It starts sparsely, then builds and builds. Layers are added one by one throughout. This is an amazing and improbable confluence of Brazilian and American/British popular music, the sound of Brazilians absorbing a sound from across the oceans and making it into something distinctive and their own. The full-band rock approach can be associated with the America above the equator,

but Nascimento's trademark yodeling at the end is a product of South America. The proceeding "Cais" is an unresolved-feeling bridge song, ending with a solemn string theme that the group will revisit on this album and again on the next. Its inclusion so early on is ostensibly to widen the listener's expectations: this is not just a rock album, but something that culls from broader, more all-encompassing sources.

The sound of "O Trem Azul" is immediately welcoming to North American ears. It shuttles between dark verses and bright, anthemic choruses, hinging its axis on a melodic guitar solo. "Saídas E Bandeiras No. 1" is another palette-cleansing track that broadens the album's sonic scope. "Nuvem Cigana" orbits around lively orchestral arrangements and robust songwriting, strangely minimizing percussion in the mix. It marks the end of the album's eclectic, rock-influenced introductory section.

"Cravo É Canela" is where the album launches in earnest, begins to sound more Latin. Like most songs on this album, its trajectory is consistently forward and upward, bolstered by a rich percussive backdrop and seamless, highly distinctive sections. "Dos Cruces" is a temporary break from the cornucopia of instrumentation in the previous few songs that's travels from subdued to epic, the tension escalating in every verse. At the end, wailing, distorted electric guitars enter over a dramatic chorus of voices. "Um Girassol da Cor de Seu

Cabelo” is a trademark Lo Borges melancholic song. The sound of pop music trying to stretch beyond its borders can be heard in the tracks’ shockingly inventive string arrangements and curveball ending section. Sweet respite from Borges’ stormy mood comes with the titanic “San Vicente.” Nascimento’s sings like a bird, its quasi-symphonic arrangement is totally assured, and it ends as quickly as it came. The sun sets on the first half of the album with the intermission song “Estrelas.” This gives way to “Clube da Esquina, No. 2,” a sublime instrumental that seems to make time stand still. With this track, the group shifts into a quasi-transcendent state, and what follows are three songs each bafflingly perfect, completely different in tone and mood, each their own separate epiphany.

“Paisagem Da Janela” is one of the most perfect and eminently likeable and pop songs I have ever heard. It is a priceless rarity of a song that pops from the ether into life when least expected. It is the kind of song that elevates an ordinary moment into something unforgettably sunny and lucid. It is so simple and honest, yet, outside of the Beatles, so few songs like it exist. The chiming electric triplet notes sparkle like sunlight on water. Unlike the rest of the album, the song stays completely on even keel. It flashes into existence like an apparition from its sudden first notes, activates some sweet spot in the brain for three minutes, and quickly vanishes again.

There is nothing remotely similar to “Me

Deixa Em Paz” on the rest of Clube da Esquina. In three parts we witness the languid swing of bossa nova being devoured by the dark spiritual energy and polyrhythm of Brazil’s Northeast. The depth and character of this unheralded female vocalist’s singing is so striking that our mind’s eye immediately constructs the contortions of her face emoting as the music marches forward. Even Nascimento’s mountainous voice, which until this point has sailed uncontested over the music, is reduced to an echoey intonation in the background by this army of percussion. The song ends with a resolute bang, and fades away smoldering, as smoke curling into the air.

In “Os Povos” Nascimento’s voice rises from the ash, shakes the dust off, and delivers its most gripping performance. It moves from a stark beginning to a full-bodied conclusion as supporting instruments shuffle in behind the syncopated guitar and through the back door. The final measures of the song are the epicenter of the album and its true climax.

“Saidas E Bandeiras No. 2” is another palette cleanser, the pronounced end to an amazing four-song suite, and the beginning of the album’s grand final act. A less ambitious group could have ended it at “Os Povos.” “Um Gosto de Sol” sounds like nothing else, and includes a deeper exploration of the theme initially introduced in “Cais.” “Pelo Amor de Deus” is the album’s acid trip: spacey keyboards, buzzing electric guitars, organ drenched in sub-aqueous reverb, hypnotic

vocals, and an abrupt ending. “Lilia” is a longer, more involved palette cleanser that revisits some of the album’s previous themes. “Trem de Doido” has a mood of conveying a message of poignancy and importance; it feels much longer than four minutes. This is clearly a Borges song, and here he’s at his best. Language aside, it sounds contemporary enough to have been an American anthem in the 90’s.

“Nada Será Como Antes” comes almost out of nowhere, and has the poppy rhythm, excellent pop songwriting, and ascending background harmonies of a Beatles song. It leaves no doubt with respect towards the strength and athleticism of Borges and Nascimento’s songwriting, and here the production/engineering of the album especially shines – each instrument sounds colossal, magnificent. “Ao Que Vai Nascer” is the album’s bewildering conclusion, incorporating elements of each song while sounding like none of them. It feels as though Borges and Nascimento could have gone on making the album forever—and they indeed continued with *Clube da Esquina II*--but knew, grudgingly, that it had to end somewhere. The song’s irresolute feeling foreshadows *Clube da Esquina*’s predecessor, and evidences that there were a surplus of ideas happening in the studio.

Clube da Esquina’s chief strengths are the sincerity, power, and breadth of Borges and Nascimento’s songwriting, its inventive instrumentation and arranging, the impeccable

quality of production and engineering, and the robust musicianship throughout. It provides a panoramic introduction to the popular music of Brazil, both inviting to foreign ears and still resolutely Brazilian. Though disappointingly few outside of Brazil are aware of it, *Clube da Esquina* can be called, without hyperbole, an epic masterwork of popular music.

Modest Mouse: *We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank*

Despite booming sales, Modest Mouse's previous release, *Good News for People Who Like Bad News*, was a comedown album. It couldn't have been any other way. The group would have had to completely reinvent themselves to trump their 2000 masterpiece, *The Moon & Antarctica*. *Good News* distilled their spastic, apocalyptic sound into something altogether more compressed, and it gained them a good deal of mainstream recognition. Their latest album, *We Were Dead Before the Ship Even Sank*, was thusly anticipated as either a return to greatness or a flat-out failure. Unfortunately, it's the latter. For the first time, this album finds an uninspired Modest Mouse going through the motions. Frontman Issac Brock sums it up on track seven himself: "We've got everything down to a science." *We Were Dead* is the sound of a band making a living, not art.

The album's sonic character has been filtered out, and sounds scarcely different from the dime-a-dozen recordings of the band's peers. *The Moon* fizzled with its own special electricity: cranked up amps buzzed in a silent studio before exploding with chords. Modest Mouse developed a cutting, treble-y, hyper-real sonic aesthetic from their first album, and perfected it on *The Moon*. Even *Good News* had a sound of its own, one achieved by dipping everything into murky compression that

made dynamic transitions more pregnant.

Sonically, *We Were Dead* is trapped in flat-line digital thinness. Rock has its own concept of harmony. The sounds produced and juxtaposed by a band's four or five musicians can complement each other, or they can blur together, destroying the listener's ability to notice dynamics, timbre, color, and contrast. Even when everyone's playing in the same key and tempo, our ears immediately evaluate how everything's working together at an even higher level. For now, we can call it "band harmony." *We Were Dead's* band-harmony is a blurry, washed-out mess.

Modest Mouse have fantastic senses of punctuation, tension, and dynamics, and each thrived in the bleak, paranoid world created on *The Moon*. *Good News's* best moments also resulted from playing with tension, but in a more concentrated way. *We Were Dead* almost entirely forsakes tension. Where the music could be exuberant, it's flat. The group plainly had a collective sense of purpose, now they're a faceless rhythm section for the augmentation of Brock's tired ranting. On *The Moon*, he and the group's guitarist had their mojo working. Brock screamed, sang, and ranted in counterpoint to inventive, jagged, hangnail guitar rhythms. His outbursts in their best work were added like spices; now his melody-less singing is, gratingly, the main ingredient.

Like the false sureness of a drunkard who thinks he knows exactly what he's doing, an

unwelcome confidence characterizes this album. Improbably enough, it was uncertainty itself that made the music on *The Moon* more daring, urgent, and worthy of attention. Explorers are uncertain. The discomfort of uncertainty is a necessary evil in the forging of new sonic territory, and can be heard in great albums of every decade. That mood has been replaced here by an unprecedented lack of restraint, unwelcome song lengths, and a common symptom of the rock music midlife crisis: the gimmicky inclusion of The Smiths' Johnny Marr and The Shins' James Mercer as guest musicians.

Astonishingly, there is not one good song on this album. "Fire it Up" and "Parting of the Sensory" have afterthought melodies that take the songs nowhere. "Missed the Boat" flirts with a "college rock" aesthetic and the effect is reminiscent of Guster, the group that epitomized the middle of the road sound in the 1990's. "We've Got Everything," "Florida," and "Steam Enginus" have the loudness and distortion of rock anthems, but not the heart. "Little Motel" is a first but fleeting sign of real singing, sincerity, and song craft on the album. "Spitting Venom," has a bouncy, cute introduction from a band who seemed incapable of these two modes a decade ago. "People as Places as People" shows potential for the first few seconds, then treads back to familiar territory and predictable chord changes. It is strange that such loudness and energy can feel so vacuous.

The climactic bridge of “Invisible,” the album’s final song, hints back at what the group was capable of on *Good News*, then predictably goes back to the new, unpalatable *Modest Mouse*. In a ridiculous re-treading of *Good News* lyrics, Brock sings vaguely about being “crushed by the ocean.” It made sense and hit hard in the past, but, recycled again, the sentiment loses all affective power. The final song epitomizes this haphazardly sequenced album’s general lack of conviction and urgency. As far as popular music goes, *We Were Dead* is a disaster, and a thorough disappointment.

Walter Salles: *Central Station*

In 1990, Brazil's economy was shut down to curb inflation. Culture all but grinded to a halt. For five years, almost no films were made. Brazil's culture is notoriously rich, colorful, and most of all resilient. With so much upheaval, the country has a history of triumphing over crooked politicians. Legend has it that Brazilian students and workers, not to be downtrodden, took to the streets and successfully pressured congress to impeach their culture-obliterating president. When the floodgates of culture once again burst open, Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil* (Central Station) came roaring out. There has been much ado in the past two years about the emergence of a great Latin cinema, and this film more than any other got that ball rolling.

Brazilian film is preoccupied with identity, both national and personal. When American filmmakers want to find and depict the "real" America, most head out west. When Brazilians get this same urge, they set their sights on the sertão, Brazil's vast desert region. Salles is known as cinema's road movie specialist, and the desert journey in *Central Station* is what earned him the title.

The trip is led by Dora, a grumpy retired schoolteacher whose occupation is to write letters in Rio de Janeiro's central transit station for the city's illiterate. When one of her customers is fatally hit by a bus outside of the station,

she reluctantly assumes responsibility for the deceased's newly orphaned son, Josué. The film is a chronicle of Dora and Josué plunging into Brazil's seemingly endless desert in search of the boy's estranged father. The plot is driven by the quest of little Josué, but the film is really about Dora.

She's a character of disparity: unmarried, middle-aged, self-centered, and cynical, but also strong, self-sufficient, and independent. Her stubborn isolation thaws as she goes deeper into the country and her relationship with Josué. As this happens, the chaos and claustrophobia of the city gives way to pastoral Brazil's windswept, cloud-flecked horizons. It is no accident that the film's color palette gradually morphs from the city's desaturated browns and grays to nature's vibrant blues, greens, and whites.

Following the trajectory of Salles' career is interesting in that he becomes looser and less controlling with each subsequent film. The more wisdom, competence, and experience he gains, the more he's able to relinquish control. His films are not characterized by restraint, per se, but by an utter lack of artifice inspired in part by Italian neo-realism. He doesn't tamper with the world he's conveying. Even in his most epic landscape shots, the land seems to assert itself, rather than the director having to make a spectacle of it. Many of *Central Station's* most sublime, enchanting, and otherwise memorable scenes were entirely the result of serendipity and chance. The

rhythm and pacing of the film is so accomplished, and its narrative so seamless, that one would never guess.

One of the director's signatures is to juxtapose the very best actors with non-actors. Dona is played by Fernanda Montenegro, Brazil's most respected stage actress (and, as a result of this film, its first academy award nominee). On the other hand, Josué is played by Vinícius de Olivera, a boy who Salles "discovered" prior to the film shining shoes in an airport. Almost all of the film's extras were non-actors, many of whom were allegedly unaware of their being filmed. Salles claims to have more faith in talent than experience; *Central Station* was written by two rookie, non-professional screenwriters.

One of the movie's most moving and memorable scenes—and after the one hour mark, just about every scene is memorable—according to Salles, was completely unplanned. The protagonists sit on a bench in the back of bright red flatbed truck, their hair whipping around as the car flies down the highway in the middle of the desert. Dora is crying because all her money is gone. Josué is oblivious, but with good reason: the two are surrounded by elderly Brazilian Catholics of African descent, all dressed in white, praying rosaries and belting out traditional hymns. In the sertão, the soul triumphs over matter, and the moment of crisis turns into one of inventive redemption. This scene was unplanned, a result of serendipity, and it is a credit to Salles' talent

that, without doing the research, we would have never known better. It is our privilege as viewers that, in an era dominated by the green screen, Salles is still out there, filming the real world as it happens.

Joanna Newsom: *The Milk-Eyed Mender*

The Milk-Eyed Mender's first track makes one hell of a first impression. Within the album's first seconds, Newsom intones: "We sailed away on a winter's day, with fate as malleable as clay." She delivers this first line like an bemused eight-year-old, then yowls the second like a raspy West Virginian barmaid. After a mere three seconds, her voice shifts quickly back to that of a child on a snowy Christmas morning. She balances the phrasing of her erudite verses like a skilled gymnast. From the get-go, she conditions us to expect the unexpected, and the proceeding tracks ping pong between sublime and jarring.

The Milk-Eyed Mender is significant for combining traditional American folk, African, and classical music to make the improbable byproduct of something that can be called popular music. She weaves bona-fide poetry into her songs with an elegance rarely seen since Leonard Cohen. While many high-minded, criticism-reading musician are paranoid about pretension, Newsom is too talented to be careful. She throws around words that even her English-major listeners will need dictionaries to understand. After Lou Reed and Bob Dylan spawned an entire culture of lesser artists unsuccessfully dashing off spontaneous lyrics, Newsom's poetic meticulousness is welcome.

A large contributor to the perseverance of classical and jazz snobbery is pop's contentment

with repeating itself from verse to chorus. Variation keeps things fresh, and Newsom knows it. She builds solid foundations for her songs with the architecture of American popular song, distinguishes the interior with uncommon African polymeter, and beautifies the façade with rhythmic and melodic embellishments that keep careful ears engaged. Rock bands who wish to evolve should take note.

The album's most arresting, spellbinding song is "'En Gallop'." The song clears its throat in the exposition, then begins to flow at a languid, music-box-like pace. Finally, the concluding verse appears seemingly from nowhere. The segment's melody, rhythm, and accent are angular and unpredictable, and uniquely so for their lack of abrasiveness. In the sound of calloused fingers crawling over bent strings, harp, singing, and lyrics coalesce into something entirely greater and more profound than their individual parts. The song emanates both sophistication and simplicity at once. It is shocking to hear sound like this created in real time by the a single person. Moments like these make a song compelling over hundreds of listens.

Like most debut albums, this isn't quite a masterpiece. She will move on to bigger and better things. Its abrasive songs, despite evidencing an uncompromising, courageous musical mind, are very tough listens. Scattering them throughout the album instead of bunching them together seems a bizarre sequencing decision. But, this

is quibbling. Though she's sometimes derided for pretension, the sincerity of her singing and the sophistication of her craft render critical finger-pointing obsolete. In a decade of musical lightweights, Newsom is a peerless artist, and even greater things from her are to come.

Terrence Malick: *Days of Heaven*

One of America's greatest directors has made only four films. The auteur in question is Terrence Malick. His debut, *Badlands*, is a classic lovers on the run picture starring a young, James Dean-idolizing Martin Sheen. Malick's middle child, the somehow lesser-known *Days of Heaven* (1978), was such a masterwork that he didn't endeavor to make his next, the more recent *Thin Red Line*, until twenty years later. It's easy to see why.

Days of Heaven stars a dreamy young Richard Gere as a "Chicaga" steel mill worker on the lamb with girlfriend and little sister in tow. For reasons only alluded to, he and his girlfriend masquerade as brother and sister, and the three climb atop a smoke-billowing locomotive packed with other hobos and head south in search of a better life. When they find work for a pittance as shuckers on a sprawling wheat farm in the north Texan panhandle, the stage is set. The rich farm owner falls for Gere's girlfriend, initiates a love triangle, and a dazzling pandemonium of Americana ensues: flying circuses, plagues, devastating wildfires, biplanes, model T's, and shootouts.

Through an onslaught of gorgeous panoramic shots, Malick depicts America at its most operatic, making the great plains seem like a place out of the Bible or ancient Greece. Characters are bathed in perennial golden sunlight, their wind-cracked faces are shot from below. This

is the mythic America of Thomas Hart Benton and Edward Hopper. Here, even Gere's hellish steel factory labor seems meaningful and heroic. Ennio Morricone channels Aaron Copland for the score, and a story emerges from a backdrop of laboring humans dwarfed by endless Texas horizon. The omnipresent wind is so fierce that it drowns out conversations; we're treated to hypnotic extended shots of it—Malick's calling card—simply blowing the wheat around. Generous dissolves make dreamlike scenes seem to melt into one another. Sound and visuals aren't the only artistically exploitable facets of the film – Malick has the thick-accented, cigarette-smoking 13-year-old little sister carry the dreamy narration, and her distant commentary provides a surreal perspective on the events that surround her in the adult world. In the picture's larger effort to unite the two, her comments drift between the commonplace and the poetic.

The lamentable thing about *Days of Heaven*, though, is that it tries to pack the depth and complexity of a great novel into an impossibly short ninety minutes. Where many directors will take ten minutes to explore and convey a character's reaction to something pivotal, Malick packs it into a fleeting facial expression and presses on. This obligation to be economical ramps up the film's melodrama, and will turn some off. The constant stream of major events is so unlike the pace of real life or typical movies that it over-stimulates to the point of

disorientation. This film absolutely revels in the sensual. Viewers will either be lost in Days of Heaven or lost to it.

Furthermore, like the characters it depicts, the film takes itself seriously and employs little restraint. This is not a slow, ponderous European art film, however. There's something quintessentially American about it; something colossal seems to happen every ten minutes. In turn, the hyper-romantic Gere over-acts as if he's on stage. (One of the few points of comic relief is a moment where the little sister, a quintessential sarcastic Midwesterner, distractedly mocks her brother's grand self-image). The film depicts times are both heroic and dire, and though there are lighthearted moments, there's not much room for joking around.

Compared to the well-established nations across the pond, America's history is a brief, poignant moment. Days of Heaven shows just how powerful and epic any fraction of that moment could have been. This is a story of larger-than-life people in an increasingly larger-than-life nation. The revelation of the film's final minutes is that its story, with all the weight and allegory, is a mere chapter in these characters' much longer lives. Like America, they're still young, and there's plenty of history still to be written. Even in the 1930's, our country might have seemed like a dream world, incomprehensibly vast. Malick's greatest achievement is making that century-old feeling palpable to us today.

Slum Village: *Fantastic, Vol. II*: A Tour

This piece was written as the beginning of a larger book about J Dilla's classic albums for the 33 1/3 series.

Fantastic, Vol. II begins with four metronome clicks of the MPC, followed by an alarm clock metaphorically saying “it’s time.” This fragment of a song is the transition point between *Fantastic Vol. I* and *Vol. II*. Still here are the former’s off-kilter drums, murky bass, and woozy synthesizers, but this time around, everything’s a bit more polished. Questlove has popularly commented on the fascinating strangeness of this track’s particular lyrical snippet when heard, the first time around, on *Vol. I*: “...there is this ‘funk-geek’ chorus thing going on that I can hear loud and clear. “We say fan-tah-sero-you say-huh-whut?-you-know-its that-shh—T!-eh yo.” What the hell?” But, as much as this intro is about acknowledging the album’s roots, it’s even more about moving beyond and transcending them.

“Conant Gardens” is a bare-bones distillation of Dilla’s production style. Listen to how the drums emerge: first hi-hats, then, unexpectedly, two syncopated thumps of the kick drum. Finally, the rim shot, and the beat launches. Though it’s a simple construction, these meticulous flourishes are what earned Dilla his reputation. There’s

never a dull moment, even though the song was crafted from simple ingredients: a short bass loop, rapping, sporadic and tastefully applied effects, and most importantly, the shuffling drums that are Dilla's unmistakable rhythmic trademark. This song and the next are the simplest, most upbeat, and most accessible on the album. The timbre and mood of most later songs are so rich and unusual that putting them here, early on, would overwhelm the ear.

Rather than honoring the time-old tradition of emcees flaunting their lyrical prowess through extended verses, Dilla gets everyone in on the first verse, but in astonishingly short, connected bursts. Unlike the majority of hip hop, the focus here is musical, not lyrical. The songs on this album get by quickly and constantly moving forward, keeping listeners engaged and entertained through constant variation and embellishment. Despite their highly distinct vocal timbres and rhythmic deliveries, the disparate voices of Slum Village blend together, interrupt, and finish one another's sentences. Both choruses end unexpectedly, and in entirely different ways. "Conant Gardens" effectively has one-and-a-half choruses: the one that kicks off the song and ends abruptly as the first verse cuts in, and later, the simple repetition of the words "do it," backed by a psychedelic scratched sample. Hip hop usually gets away with relatively un-varied repetition, but Dilla seems to have surplus ideas and uses them to go above and beyond the norm.

When the group says “we don’t stop,” the beat goes silent for two counts. This unexpected punctuation, broadly, is one of Dilla’s calling cards, and he uses it on this album more than ever. At song’s end, a brief musical snippet of a beat from Vol. I backs the cheery voice of James Brown’s ghost in a brief outro. It’s a well-executed segue, and through it Dilla shows that there was a lot of planning, experimentation, and groundwork to be laid before a hip-hop album could move like this.

“I Don’t Know” is pure fun, ushered in by a chorus that takes the worst of swear words and twists its repeated use into something of Motown-feeling catchiness. The song’s cornerstone is a sample of James Brown, perhaps the most direct, revered, and oft-sampled influence in all of hip-hop. The track’s unobtrusive guitar loop evidences Dilla’s razor-sharp ear: these sounds were originally the seemingly insignificant fragments of more robust guitar playing, but the producer has spliced them together into something new and fascinatingly fragile. The drumming is as funky as anything as James Brown’s drummer ever played, and subtly nuanced throughout to complement the flow of words that the beat propels. Jazzy Jeff is a curveball of a guest, but his turntable solo caps the song off tastefully.

A probably-exaggerated rumor says that Dilla was wont to smoke thirty or forty blunts per song. It’s hard to ignore that the first three tracks of

the album are its lightest and simplest, a kind-of soundtrack for the congregating, rolling, and passing ritual--a prelude to the tone of the album getting much deeper.

With a brief snippet of one of the original samples used to construct the song, "I Don't Know" abruptly ends to make way for "Jealousy," a point of no return. Starting here the album begins its upward arc, and for the next half-hour or so, the ante gets upped, and upped, and impossibly upped. The song itself seems to start mid-bar. The drumming is an unhurried and salient example of Dilla's trademark shuffle. The track is initiated with a chorus, its broken-up syllables are a more evolved version of Vol. II's first intro track. Here, a simple sequence of statements and questions gets its syllables deconstructed, stretched, and emphasized rhythmically.

Suddenly it's apparent how consistently catchy the choruses have been so far, despite their having little or any singing. In the beginning, hip-hop started with only sporadic, if any choruses, and if a song had one, they were usually rapped. It was only as hip-hop mingled with R+B and became more radio friendly throughout the early and mid-90's that the now-ubiquitous singing girls started to emerge on choruses everywhere. The melody-less refrains of "Jealousy," and many others on the album, hearken back to the old school, are chorus-like enough to sound contemporary, and are ultimately distinctive

for being neither. In this song, each chorus is a different entity, each starts at a different part, and none are carbon copies of each another. Hip hop's inherent repetitiveness is usually a weakness, but Dilla uses the open space to create opportunities for rhythmic variation and embellishment, effectively turning a weakness into a strength.

The beat itself is a hazy, nocturnal, and subdued evolution of soul jazz, a genre that's proved endlessly fertile for crate-digging hip-hop producers. The monophonic staccato organ melody that emerges in the chorus, comprised of a mere three different notes, is a step up in nuance for hip hop. These verses are the first extended ones on the album thus far, and follow a upward arc in quality. The most impressive part of the second verse is the drumming, which features unmistakable and quasi-improvisatory interplay with the voices it supports. Even Questlove, who by all counts is the finest real hip-hop drummer, would be proud of so eloquently backing the words of emcees. Astonishingly, these two verses, which are excellent in their own right, can be seen simply as preparation for the grand finale that is Jay Dee's verse.

Since his untimely death, Dilla's reputation has risen to the arguable king of the hip-hop beat. However, he, not to mention the others in Slum Village, often catches flack for being a comparatively mediocre emcee. His verse in "Jealousy" flies in the face of these accusations.

It is utterly extraordinary, a clear highlight of the album, and one of the artist's best moments. After dawdling around the beat for a few seconds, he launches into a magnificent thirty seconds of breathless, unrelenting verse that seems, with the aid of pointillist comping and expressive panning, to enter the ear from all directions. I have never heard anything like it.

After another iteration of the chorus, the song fades out to the album's first and best skit, a brief interlude in which Dilla, barely stifling laughter, tries to forthrightly persuade two sassy, hilariously uncooperative females into a threesome. One of the glorious synthesizers that comprise the forthcoming track's many rich layers slowly creeps in, and soon the conversation gives way to what may be the album's best song.

A quick cascade of synthesizer, then voice and drums initiates "Climax," the perfect soundtrack to an LSD-induced visit to strip club in 2050. The emphasis of the song is neither melodic nor rhythmic, but textural. The words are expository and conversational, less like old-school rapping. As opposed to the more live, more vintage, more shuffling feels of the album's preceding songs, this cut has almost no swing. Immediately one notices Dilla's voluptuous mixing: voices and the snare come from the tweeters, layers of sub-aqueous-sounding synthesizers emerge from the midrange, and the murky bass fills out the lows. This song's sonic architecture is worthy of comparison to that textbook pillar of hip-hop mixing, Dre's Chronic

2001. This beat is incomparable. Even white pre-teens from Nebraska could sound dope rhyming over it.

Listening to “Climax’s” chorus on headphones is the sonic approximation of looking through a kaleidoscope. The track has all the characteristics of the common popular rap song of the late 90’s, for better or worse: a song about threesomes, delivered via conversational, un-athletic rapping, with a girl singing the hook, and a beat polished to sparkling digital perfection. But “Climax” ultimately transcends its unexceptional on-paper summary, and this epitomizes something very important about this album: rather than doing something explicitly different from here-today, gone-tomorrow mainstream hip-hop, Slum Village does what all the other blinged-out, misogynistic rappers are doing, but better, with more creativity and musicality.

This time, Baatin’s verse, the last, shines. People often vaguely throw around the word “flow” to describe rapping, but here Baatin does that in the real, true sense of the word. His bit begins with logical, sequential, complete sentences, but gradually extends into non-sequiturs and jumps from topic to topic. The development of his words is not linear, and feels like a freestyle; its verbal trajectory is dictated by the spontaneous and inventive filling in of blank syllables that precede the rhymed word at the end of each line. In other words, what matters is the journey, not the destination.

Despite its narcotic mood, “Climax” still managed to sound familiar enough to make it to radio, and the group actually made an unremarkable music video to accompany it. I was shocked that it wasn’t shot or set at night. Its feeling seemed completely incongruent with that of song; none of the fertile imagination that imbued this track with layer upon glorious layer of sound was salvaged for the video. “Climax” is a singular force on the album; none of the other tracks are similar. Like the album’s other single, “Raise it Up,” this track sticks out simply because it’s so clearly, uncommonly original. The absence of an outro further separates it from the flow of the album. In any case, the proverbial script is about to be flipped, again.

“Hold Tihhht” is like a DJ Premier cut on valium, so sparse, unanchored, and generally skewed that it’s hard to focus. Dilla begins with unusual, highly rhythmic scratches, then previews one of the samples he’s about to tear up. When the drums come in, it’s in an unusual order: hihat, kick, kick, snare. Many of these songs have similarly distinct entrances on the drums, but aren’t showy about it. Turntable static then acts as a quiet and improbable rhythmic placemaker, but just for a moment. What feels like an unusually long time passes before words begin.

When Q-Tip finally enters, he does so in deliberate, syncopated opposition to the beat. The bass stumbles in, but does it deliberately,

elegantly, then coasts on loop for the remainder of the song. The hihat lags lazily, wonderfully, a bit behind the rest of the drums. Then, there's no real chorus, just a indistinct vocal sample intermittently repeated for a couple bars.

Though the Slum Village verses are quite good, the rappers get bumped out of the spotlight on this track. Why? Because Q-Tip's voice is the only one that really steps above the beat, and it dwarfs his hosts' rapping. Though making Q-Tip's verse the first was an obvious conceptual decision and a passing of the torch, hip hop is more engaging when the verses continually improve. Here the first and last verses bookend two comparatively mediocre ones. Q-Tip's verse manages to be as soberly, maturely prophetic as some of Biggie and 2Pac's years before, but far humbler.

In this song, Dilla has managed to use the same instrumentation as his peers in the Roots, but achieves get a completely different kind of sound. When competing hiphop was all bombast and high theater, this song used the sparest of instruments. The next song will continue to do just that, and to even greater effect.

"Tell Me," a languid, block-party soundtrack, reeks of D'Angelo: the jazzy electric guitars and Rhodes that permeated Voodoo flutter in the background, and though he sings no words, his voice is all over the track. The drums play straighter than everything else, the hihats continue to lag behind the other drums. A lazy double bass presides. The chorus is all

fragmented vocables from D'Angelo, and the words are deconstructed sentences that make sense only by implication. With D'Angelo, it's not what you say, but how you say it.

Each verse feels sincere and thoroughly relaxed. The best part is comes in brief bridge, around 2:20. After a quick cascade of gorgeous chords, D'Angelo, at his most restrained, finally releases for a brief moment, while a lightly dissonant electric piano swerves through the background. The song concludes with one of the most bizarre and inexplicable intros on a rap album I've ever heard, in which, presumably, a Southern white ignoramus makes three reluctant black guys sing a ditty. There is no context, and it's poorly done: I can offer no explanation or excuse for it. Unfortunately, not all rap groups have Outkast's ability to consistently make engaging and relevant intros. Fortunately, it's over soon, and the party begins.

“What It's All About” and “Fourth & Back” must be discussed in tandem –if you feel like listening to one, you will probably feel like listening to the other. “What It's All About's” staggered entrance quickly helps our ears take note of each layer: first drums, then bass, vocals, the primary sample, and, finally, synth. The bassline is filtered throughout for interest, making the low end sound deeper, warmer. Dilla adlibs over the beat before launching into a brief verse in which he seems to pinball around the song's rhythm, confronting it from every angle.

It will take a few listens to realize it, but almost every sonic layer of this song is constantly being modified for sustained interest.

It took some time for these two songs to enter my bloodstream. One day, the opening segment of “Fourth and Back”—where Dilla repeats the word “shake” over a reversed cymbal—seemed to grab me by the collar. Many have similarly repeated the segment over and over trying to figure out exactly what’s going on. All at once, in a kind of sonic pretzel, sounds fade in and out while playing in both forward and reverse. The bassline is relentless, hypnotic, and disorienting, but the drums anchor it to the ground. Anyone can perceive the charm and brilliance of drum layering of this song: one snare place is held down by a snap, and the other, both a clap and snare. The bevy of effects, delays, echoes, and vocables in the background are peerless: danceable club joints like this usually must be minimal and straightforward to be effective, but not so for Dilla. The choruses, if they could be called those, are typically, wonderfully asymmetrical.

The song goes nowhere, and that’s its virtue. “Fourth & Back” simply flows by its own rules, and doesn’t need to retreat back to the chorus to gain footing. Baatin’s verse is the most interesting for its casual entrance and the way it floats effortlessly over the beat. Soon after he backs off, the song quickly fades to make way for the album’s defining track.

There is something indescribably special about

“Untitled/Fantastic.” The strings enter first, puncture our attention, and don’t release their grip until the song fades. People I play it for are awed by it time and again. The rapping and noncommittal drumming both come in shockingly off-kilter, but then everything falls into place. Bass directly supports the keys. The snare sound, which is a snare, a clap, and a stick slapping a tambourine – hits harder than ever. Nowhere else on the album are verses delivered with as much conviction. At this point, it doesn’t even matter what’s said. Hip hop is the most successful in English because we have far more phonemes than any other language, all ripe for slang and syllabic manipulation. Slum Village are among the best out there at, and the tendency to do so is rampant in this track.

The arrangement of the voices, the effects on them, and their rhythmic juxtaposition that prevents this relatively straightforward beat from stagnating. The faked-CD skips on this track best exemplify how Dilla time and again consistently rethinks and then embellishes small details in his songs, turning with small flourishes the ordinary and repetitive to the surprising and evolving. Though some may call it mere ear candy, this textbook lateral thinking is perhaps his most extraordinary talent.

“Untitled/Fantastic” is clearly the record’s climax. From here on, it’s an inconsistent downhill journey: we hear as much of the same amazing stuff we did on the way up, but it won’t

be as continually surprising. At this point, too, the sequencing falls apart. I approach the songs from this point out of their order, based instead on their thematic and sonic coherence. “Untitled” initiates the nocturnal, comedown portion of the album, hearkening back to the nocturnal, basement-sounding first edition of *Fantastic*, reminding us of how far the group has come.

Though mellow, there’s an vaguely discordant undercurrent to “Fall In Love.” Its mystery and ambivalence are bizarrely heightened by the distance of Dilla’s singing in the chorus, and the bizarre Kermit the Frog-like rapping in the first verse. It never comes full circle, and in terms of its ambivalent mood, there are few comparable songs in all of hip hop. To mix this dry, straight hi-hat with a blatantly reverb-soaked rim shot is a musical texture that could have only resulted from the process of sampling. It feels low-fi, but don’t let your ears deceive; there are all kinds of scattershot cymbals tucked throughout the chorus. When the hesitant instruments are through creeping in and out of the mix, the track ends with an unremarkable freestyle drums-and-rapping skit, and the fog over the second half of the album grows thicker.

“Get Dis Money” is a straightforward, immaculately produced song, and the flipside of “Fall in Love.” The beat, the mix, and the delivery of the minimal-but-effective chorus are all spot on, leaving the slightly embittered state of the last and moves on to something more

resolute, contemplative, and calm. Time seems to stand still. Dilla stretches the boundaries of his genre again: hip hop is not usually this calm and contemplative.

The drums in “2U4U” are deliberately thin, but their swing is infectious and spot-on. The timing of the samples and drums are out of sync, but just ever so slightly. It sounds real. The woozy bed of samples Dilla chose to construct the song’s atmosphere begin simply enough, but by the end of the song they blend together in intricate knots. The arrangement of the electric piano samples is especially soulful. The clarity and cleanness of the recording is remarkable, somehow, in the midst of so much pristine digital-ness, the obviously analog sources retain their warmth.

“Raise It Up’s” beat is absolutely brilliant, and though indebted to the Neptunes, sounds like nothing else on the album or elsewhere. Here Dilla’s typical nuance flies out the window as the song drastically shifts between tension and release: for four bars there’s no bass, and for the next four there’s an overwhelming amount of it. The contrast allows the rappers to play off of it, and it drives their verses forward. The clever construct that the verses are delivered through is yet another example of the group stepping beyond the normal efforts of other rappers. Being the album’s main single, “Raise It Up” finds the group cranking the misogyny way up. Some may cringe, but the song is so unique, and its angle so engaging and inventive, that the group gets away

with it.

“Players” conjures the ghost of There’s A Riot Goin’ On. Their similarities, like the dead-weight shuffle of the hihats, dark, bassy palettes, and muted vocal deliveries, are subtle but palpable. The song’s aura, like that of Riot, is clearly the result of artists holing up inside their studios, losing touch with the outside world, and mining sound solely from the deep, shady crevices of their rich musical imaginations. Dilla works in all kinds of strange low frequency noises and milks the main, repeated sample in a way that makes it seem to continually evolve. The hand-claps are perennially, subtly off. There’s no real chorus, and that “Players” sample actually says “Claire;” we’re led to hear “players,” and do. It is easy to take this song and this half of the album’s uniqueness for granted. There are simply not many rap songs or albums that are foggy and ambivalent like this, even in the wake of Dilla’s snowballing influence.

“CB4” is about as minimal and loose as the album it gets; a “real band” would have no trouble faithfully re-creating it. The background sample that musically defines the chorus gets more pronounced with every iteration. Like a smooth hand-off of the baton in a relay race, the chorus tumbles neatly into the verses, and back again. Typical creative tweaks abound: implying the rhymed word without saying it, unexpected entrances, pasted-in dialogue, unexpected drops of the beat, twisting of syllables, and so on. Dilla’s

verse is noteworthy in that it seems to contain two trajectories; just when we think his verse is about to be handed off, it seems to start anew. Baatin's verse too is interesting for its vague, non-sequitur preaching, spontaneous half-singing, and incomplete sentences defined by omissions of their subjects or predicates. Listening to what he says is enrapturing, but we can only speculate as to what his strings of implications mean.

This leaves us with three stragglers. "Eyes Up," in a sentence, is Fantastic's bastard child. The vocal delivery is exaggerated and awkwardly straight, the beat, for once, is numbingly repetitive, and the unremarkable chorus is second-rate, especially for Dilla.

"Once Upon a Time," on the other hand, must have been highly anticipated, and with good reason. Pete Rock is an undisputed legend of production, and a reputed mentor to Dilla to boot. But, as things like this usually go, it doesn't sound as good as it looks on paper. Though the passages of turntable collage and Baatin's verse are wonderful, the track isn't as continually engaging and evolving as many of Dilla's others, and as such, feels too long and goes in one ear and out the other. Though Rock didn't produce the track, ironically, his lesser productions are marked by the same stagnancy.

"Go Ladies" is the twin of "Once Upon a Time," in that it has the same kind of immersive, hi-fi sonic atmosphere and doesn't really go anywhere. The track finds the emcees at their

most unpolished. Dilla here slumps from producer to beat-maker; the mental energy that fostered his attention to detail is noticeably absent, as though his bag of tricks was finally empty, used up early in the album. Though the twists of phrase in his verse are great, the beat, as undeveloped as it is, would have been better as some kind of intro. Though it has the spirit of Vol. I coming full circle, “Go Ladies” is a lackluster conclusion to the album.

The All Music Guide calls Vol. II “more of an enigma than a triumph,” and in many ways, they’re right. *Fantastic II* has been written off for myriad reasons: misogyny, excessive profanity, poor sequencing, or conceptual and lyrical shallowness. While some of these complaints are spot on, they’re dwarfed by Dilla’s astonishing leaps forward in the art of beat-making. The architecture of these songs, their meticulous embellishments, rich sonic detail, inventive, group-minded rapping, and their evolving, asymmetrical architecture are unmatched in the genre. Dilla’s production work here and elsewhere have set the standard for all contemporary producers who value musical integrity over mass appeal, and will continue to do so throughout the hip hop’s ensuing innovations. After finally, reluctantly closing the door on its golden age, this is the sound of hip hop, again, evolving.

Feist: *The Reminder*

Leslie Feist's previous album, *Let It Die*, though over-eclectic and under-cohesive, received heaps of praise. *The Reminder* is a giant leap forward. Though it won't change the face of music, the album sounds both current and timeless. Its consistently tasteful songs are living proof that innovation still can happen the old-fashioned way: with solid songwriting and a real musicians playing real instruments together in a real room.

Between albums, Ms. Feist has done some growing up. There's a new intelligence and maturity in the timbre and dynamics of her singing. She has taken control of her voice in a way that few pop-singing women since the 1970's have since. Here, her vocals bend slightly to convey the meaning of the lyrics, letting the words mean more than they seem. Where in the past she struggled to sound convincing or abandoned conviction for fashionable indie cuteness, here she conveys a large swatch of the emotional spectrum with only her voice. The key word here is subtlety. Though dipped in sumptuous reverb and full of inventive harmonies, *The Reminder*'s more daring moments are fleeting, well-timed, and achieved without the excessive pyrotechnics of her peers. The songs are short and sweet, and if there's ever a weak passage, an uncommonly strong one will inevitably follow.

"My Moon My Man" and "Sea Lion Woman"

are paradoxes: both obvious single material, but also the album's most unremarkable songs. "1, 2, 3, 4" sets the standard for other female twenty-something millennial singers, and will be planted on millions of mix CDs. The first and last tracks are slowly but constantly building, refined, and sincere, and should hold up best over time. The album's few missteps are easily forgettable. If she grows as much after this album as she did before it, Feist's next offering should be a bona-fide masterpiece. For now, let's say *The Reminder* is one of the best releases of year.

Kylie Minogue: *X*

Kylie Minogue, the Australian “pop princess,” has officially become a full-blown, dancing, singing, lingerie-modeling fembot. For the fifty-four minute duration of *X*, Minogue has been programmed to sing variations on the theme of falling in lust on the dance floor.

The album is the byproduct of a record label trucking in Christopher Walken-esque super-producers to conjure musical gold. They threw all kinds of stuff at the wall to make this work, and *X* needs all the help it can get. To distract from Minogue’s limited vocal range, the engineers bury her voice in futuristic echo and delay. The witch-doctoring producers, of course, are half of the problem. Kylie’s best songs in the past were stripped down, constructed with simple ingredients, and strong enough to stand on their own. A handful of them had a palpable, irresistible exuberance, and imaginative, Michel Gondry-directed music videos to boot. Not so this time around.

Despite retro-futuristic affectations, Minogue’s albums have always been of the old-world, one-or-two-hits-plus-filler tradition. *X* has three so-so songs, and the rest exhaustingly retread the scenario of track fourteen, “Rippin’ Up the Disco.” Titling track twelve “Nu-Di-Ty” is simply unforgivable, and a perfect example of *X*’s gimmicky artlessness. It’s through relativism that Minogue garners rave reviews. Instead of

resorting to the lowest-common-denominator strip-club sexuality of America's female R+B singers, she gives off a more naïve, disco-era scent that seems more refined by comparison. This isn't an advancement--it's an anachronism.

While X is certainly a notch above most of what's on the radio, it's just as insipid; one could play this album on repeat for eternity in the private hell of anyone who holds music sacred. Despite the profusion of shiny bells and whistles, X's insides are hollow.

Pete Rock: *NY's Finest*

Producer Pete Rock, an undisputed legend of hip hop, has released his first album in four years! His first classic album, *Mecca & The Soul Brother*, was released in 1992, so his high reputation within the protective confines of the genre is old news. Though words are too few to begin to describe his influence within hip hop, strangely, he's little known outside of it.

His chief innovation was discovering how to "orchestrate" samples. In layman's terms, what this means is that Rock was perhaps the most instrumental figure in the layering of hip hop. He took the spare, embryonic sound of old-school hip-hop--usually a drum machine, scattered samples, monotone rapping, and scratching--and led the way in transforming it into the richer, thicker, genre-bending, multi-instrumental, ear-massaging beast it is today.

Rock's productions are among the most purely musical in all of hip hop, and *NY's Finest* unsurprisingly retains the extraordinary musicality expected of him ("That's What I'm Talking About"). In another era, Rock would have been a great bassist or drummer, and his musicality sets him apart from non-musician producer contemporaries. His mixes consistently sound two years ahead of and twice as full-bodied as almost everything else in hip hop. A single listen to "Questions" makes this clear. Compared to the dystopian landscape of swingless,

mechanistic, and over-compressed rap music on the radio, the humanity of Rock's music is much like that enduring symbol of hip-hop resilience: a flower growing from a crack in the concrete.

However, Rock doesn't seem to be trying to achieve something great with this album. NY's Finest's songs lack good hooks, development, and a certain charisma whose absence is only felt in comparison to his past work. These songs don't make a point of moving forward and evolving. For hip hop to rise above carnal or hyper-masculine background music for grinding, songs need distinct, compelling, evolving parts. As in any kind of music, for a connection to be made, the listener must be taken somewhere. These songs are static. It seems as though Rock has perfected the craft of his art so much that at this point he's content to just go through the motions.

A triple-double from Michael Jordan was never front page-worthy. NY's Finest is certainly worth a listen, but hardly a milestone in the career of a hip hop goliath.

Jack Johnson: *Sleeping Through the Static*

Jack Johnson's music is the equivalent of the beach in Corona commercials: pleasant, unchanging, anonymous, and happily oblivious to the stuff of real life. While the tropical fantasy has enormous appeal while working in a cubicle or trudging through winter slush, sitting on the same beach forever becomes boring, and that's exactly what happens on this album.

Hampered by his very limited vocal range, Johnson's songs have a habit of blurring together. But, the first track, "All at Once," is a bit of an exception. It has more depth and movement than the familiar click and clack of your average Johnson song. Nevertheless, the white-reggae-on-Vicodin formula is already falling into place: languid, staccato half-singing over muted, primarily major chords.

A line in "All at Once" catches: "It seems like the heart is no place to be singing from at all." The song now begins to seem very similar to one by that other pop stalwart, John Mayer: "Waiting on the World to Change." Both artists try to sum up the contemporary feeling--a vague dissatisfaction with America's precarious position in the world, and a sad feeling of powerlessness at doing anything about it--in a way friendly enough for top-40 radio. This feeling is swooping, subtly, throughout much of pop music: it's not only Johnson and Mayer doing stripped-down, restrained albums in a hyper-fast, hyper-

complex, hyper-technological time, but Wilco, Feist, and even Radiohead as well.

Johnson continues to sprinkle anti-war sentiment throughout the album (at one point chanting the phrase “We went beyond where we should’ve gone,”) and suddenly, the formula stretches further. Though Johnson’s music is consistently quiet and inoffensive, some light political disaffection gets thrown in to keep things from becoming saccharine. This is why his music is perfect ambiance for Starbucks and Panera Bread.

But, to really touch anyone, even quiet, amiable music has to have some cajones. By the album’s midway point, the songs are nearly indistinguishable. This is a collection of inert songs from a musician who has been remaking the same album for eight years. Like the faceless sunbathers on Corona beach, these songs, and this album, go nowhere.

Man Man: *Rabbit Habits*

Man Man elicits myriad comparisons: their music has been galled “gypsy-pop” and “kitchen rock,” and their aesthetic is routinely likened to Captain Beefheart, Frank Zappa, and Tom Waits. Those groups were genuine iconoclasts who brought truly new and shocking things to popular music for the purpose of expanding its boundaries. Comparing them to Man Man is like equating Lewis and Clark with American suburbanites seeing Yellowstone from their RVs.

The songs on *Rabbit Habits* veer between empty hyperactivity or faux-drunken ranting, like an author curing his writer’s block with bourbon. Their reputedly hyperactive shows might be a fun Friday night novelty, but their costumes and matching moustaches are distractions that conceal the band’s lack of musical inspiration.

To their credit, Man Man is a tight outfit, and their lyrics aren’t so bad, but both fail to be affecting when placed over such dilettante music. If this album underwent a year more of thoughtful incubation, perhaps Man Man would have come up with something fresh. It’s easy to buy cheap instruments, set up a home studio, and make recordings. It’s not easy to make thoughtful, original, and likeable music--this group has released a messy niche album before making the effort.

Though critics rant and rave about a new band like Man Man every week, we’re lucky to get

four or five truly good albums a year. They are another dime-a-dozen group of modest all-around talent who have three speeds and two emotions. They posit few ideas, and even fewer fresh ones. Music is capable of far more than this. Don't trust the hype. Rabbit Habits is another sampling of decadent, half-assed, weird-for-weird's-sake indie rock.

The Puppini Sisters: *Betcha Bottom Dollar*

First things first - the Puppini Sisters are a vocal trio that dress up in burlesque outfits to sing 80's pop covers (Kate Bush, Blondie, The Smiths) and nearly forgotten relics of popular music in the style of World War II-era vocal groups. Track seven is—get this--“Jeepers Creepers.” Track fifteen: “Heebie Jeebies.” Most will be suspicious of a group whose shtick invariably precedes their music, and this is no exception.

The music of the era Puppini Sisters resurrect is vanishing because it has the same characteristics that make *Leave it To Beaver* or *Lassie* humorous to us fifty years later – a sugary sweetness that's resolutely unlike real life. This is the very emotional and artistic stagnancy that hallowed groups like the Beatles and Rolling Stones worked so hard to break from. As such, *Betcha Bottom Dollar* is an unlikely reminder of just how far we've come. Though singing Gloria Gaynor's “I Will Survive” in swing is a cute and technically impressive gesture, it comes off like a talent show or nightclub routine--it's hard to find context or relevance once the act's over.

These girls are accomplished jazz performers, so, to their credit, the songs are sincerely and immaculately rendered. Unfortunately, the pitch-perfection takes precedence over the songs' potential at having emotional resonance. Like any common-fare 40's or 50's sitcom, there's little that's genuinely memorable or touching for

people today to latch on.

Betcha Bottom Dollar is a novelty album through and through, occupying the feminine end of the musical spectrum like hardcore rap and death metal do on the male side. **The Puppinis** will appeal some to fans of musicals and Broadway, genres whose performance aspects are tied inextricably to the songs. For the rest of us, like the ancient records they've briefly resurrected, most copies of it will be covered in dust by the end of summer.

Snoop Dogg: *Ego Trippin'*

Snoop Dogg's breakthrough album, *Doggystyle*, is unanimously regarded as a masterpiece of hip hop. It had to be: for Snoop and Dr. Dre, it was practically a matter of life or death: make something classic and amazing, or stay another year in the horrifying squalor of Compton and Long Beach. Since *Doggystyle*'s massive success, Snoop hasn't had to work so hard at music. The guy has his own reality show, shoe, adult film, action figure, and lord knows what else. For the twelve years since his widely-underrated *Doggfather*, he's been consistently inconsistent. Apparently, without a real need to make albums, his work falls flat. It took reuniting with his old pals, Warren G and Nate Dogg—with the mission of single-handedly saving west coast hip hop—for 213's *The Hard Way* for him to really bring it.

This, in a word, is bullshit. Snoop is blessed with one of the best voices and most magnetic personalities not only in hip hop, but all of contemporary popular music. He has his choice of working with whomever he wants in the areas of both production and guest vocalists. There is no excuse for his albums to not be completely overflowing with straight-up bangers. Instead, *Ego Trippin'* sinks comfortably into that twelve-year-old pattern. Like its many predecessors, it has exactly two decent songs: "Flashbacks"—a updated edition of classic g-funk liquid bounce—

and, of course, the more-hilarious-than-musical “Sensual Seduction,” which may well go down as the best video of 2008.

The problem on Snoop’s albums is commonplace in hip hop: his songs lack architecture. Their structures were shoddily conceived and constructed, if they exist at all. Evidently, after turning your natural talent into a Midas touch, it’s easy to go through the motions. The unfortunate pattern of Snoop’s releases is nothing new; dozens of great R+B singers went through the latter phases of their careers with similar laxity. This method works for greatest-hits compilations, but little else. For now, we’ll have to wait, again, until next time.

The Whigs: *Mission Control*

Mission Control includes Arcade Fire, Rapture, Modest Mouse, Interpol, Shins, Coldplay, and My Morning Jacket songs. Unfortunately, this is not a compilation, but The Whigs' sophomore album. The group's influences seem to consist entirely of white rock acts from the year 2000 forward. As such, being essentially a diluted form of seemingly all current rock music, it's a nice barometer for the "sound" of our particular moment in time, but isn't much for listening.

Nothing goes at all awry for this album's entire forty minutes, and that's the problem. There seems to have been little thought given to this project as a coherent album; the songs could be played in any order, and there is no thematic arc to move things along. The Whigs beat along in absolutely perfect 4/4 time, mindlessly, heartlessly, and without nuance. Though their lead singer has some panache, his words can only drift around awkwardly when placed above such polished, unaccommodating backing. The first and only moment that feels at all sincere begins, seemingly as an afterthought, in the album's final measure.

This album is the sound of technology—in the guise of a pitch-shifting, error correcting, over-compressing studio technicians—swallowing up what humans really sound like when they play instruments together. It's astonishing to see so

much life squeezed out of sound that must have started out so loud. Heavy compression strips the dynamics so much that the sonic atmosphere from song to song is nearly identical. One gets no sense of physical space, of air, of a room populated by living, breathing things. Though The Whigs are mediocre lyricists, melodists, and songwriters, no justice was done to them through such tasteless engineering.

This band has an okay shot at being a tight live act and touring for a few years. They also have a bright future in making big royalty money by schlepping these tracks to commercials for intermediate-level sedans. By then, we will have forgotten all about this album. Pop it in if you'd like something loud in the background to go in one ear and out the other.

Poems

Cancun

On the shore of any beach in Mexico,
everyone makes their way into the waves.

A gringo sprints straight into the surf
yelling, encouraged by cheers from his friends,
hairy legs cycling as if on unnatural springs,
heaving, his lunges comically slow.
Gradually relenting, he dives in, quickly
resurfaces to catch quick breath, turns
back to the shore. He raises triumphant
salty arms at the murmuring friends,
smaller now on the sandy horizon.

Nearby, a retired man in a speedo inches
forward, recoiling at each new lap of surf
as it insistently climbs a shivering leg.
You can almost see the clouds of neurons
exploding inside his brain:
questions, rationalizations, regrets,
each overcome by a tiny persistence
that pushes him slowly forward.

To the left: local children struggling
under the heaviness of soaked tee shirts,
darting to the line where the water recedes,
screaming at the inevitable onset of a wave,
turning to sputter back to shore. Frantic steps
sound like quick drips. Watchful mother,
bespectacled, close under flapping umbrella,
glances sternly above a tattered paperback
she has already forgotten.

A couple lingers where the children retreat
looking down at the foam around their ankles.
Indecision thrives in the face of such contrast.

Some others, now forty feet out, wonder
where to next, their bobbing heads dwarfed
by a silent immensity they for the first time face.
Even the tide reconsiders. We are here to do
more of what we already do.

south bend

so much sky here. big hunks of it laid out
and held up by radio towers, red blinking
lights stacked five tall. one of them is certainly
by your house, you can see it from anywhere.
the streetlights spread out in front of you
like a jagged carpet unrolled over the streets.
nothing interrupts the horizon in this fading
celestial city most would raze for the chance
to start over. a few stars hang around, sticking
it out in a dome sky neither light nor dark.
the sky covers south bend like a sleeping bag.

the city itself has evolved like a dart board:
small downtown is like the bulls-eye, surrounded
on all sides by no man's land, an evacuated area
where few drive. bug-eyed men pass on foot.
bad luck lives there. move on, hit the suburbs,
more houses than people could possibly live in,
more on the way. drive through. the houses abate,
overcome by fields, spot dotted shacks far off
off under the moonlight, fluorescent barns,
each connected by shabby power lines buzzing
forever. even this fades out like a gradient,
swallowed up by semis and highway roar, sound
you shouldn't like but miss when you're away.

everything overtaking everything—absence
of sea waves overlapping the shore made up for
by cannibal neighborhoods.

there's not much going on.
you'll remember people, not places.

Clouds

the clouds i like best
are wet ones floated in
from nowhere after it pours,
stars piercing through,
like how we'd look if our bodies
were actually filled
by white light, not blood--
one long, painless needle
stuck through a million times,
light just shooting out
in sharp thin lines
as strong as the sun.

the clouds are thick
and thin at the same time,
puffed up so you can see
beyond all doubt that water
makes them up, clouds
so transparent that the navy
blue sky cannot help
but soak itself into them.
you can't ever tell
which color they are, blue
and grey, you can barely see
that vapor moving over your
head and you can feel
the breeze on your cheek,
that same breeze that moves
them moves you.

the ground is wet,
leaves have landed
in puddles tinted golden
by the streetlights.
the whole world is wet

and will be turned dry
when you wake
to the breezy morning.

you know this even more when
you shut the door to your house
after coming in from outside.
the clouds were not a dream:
the breeze and the stillness
and silence have somehow
latched on to you, into you,
somehow flow from your eyes.
the wind moves over you
as you're falling asleep.
drops scatter across the window
not because its raining, but
because the wind is blowing
dew off the sleeping branches.

oh, the silence:
someone comes in with coffee
to wake you, only to find
you've evaporated.

Skipping

This is a kind of afternoon I have little experience with.
I caught only slightest glimpses of these days playing hooky
in different autumns, was otherwise half-confined at school,
diverted, unaware of time like this.

Now that I'm older, I wake up later--years ago
I was probably seated and sleepy at a lunch table.
Driving to do errands today, I feel sneaky,
as if I was skipping, doing something
I'm not supposed to. Haunted by a life in school,
years later I can still feel the sigh of freedom
breathing through my cracked car window,
making the cool air sweeter.

Now, I don't need loud music to amplify the moment.
Outside, it's crisp, open, and gray. Though streets are quiet
and littered with people I will never see again, I need no one.
The noise of our conversation could spoil the echoes
of this temporary world.

The Space of Your Dreams

You have gone way beyond what we thought you would when you were younger. It has taken lots of hard work, and now, you are finally rocketing out of the cosmosphere. And thank god. I can almost see you, a dot on the wide horizon, floating around in your spacesuit, looking down on everyone from miles above. When you return, I want to hear all about it. I will ask what it's like sleeping without sunset or sunrise. I have to know what it's like waking up in midair.

What you dream about in this space of your dreams?
Do you get homesick to be any place on earth?
Do you yearn to be anywhere on the immense surface so far below you, even lost on a deserted island or floating on a raft in the middle of the sea, a former vastness that seems so small and shallow compared to the twinkling black ocean you float in now?
Do you wonder what people are doing in the places you never visited but read about, or if anyone's awake in the dark splotches between the glowing cities on the American plain? Is it more mysterious out there than the back roads of our small town, paved through the dense impenetrable forest escalating on both sides, the leaves shaking over our car as we drive home at night?

Will you reach the point between our moon and earth where both are just as far away? Which calls you more?
Which do you look out the porthole window at when trying to fall asleep? Has the life liquid came out of you, things back here conjuring it out, and do you watch it float in the air, relieved, before you use a dirty sock to swoop your last fundamental reminder of human-ness cleanly out of the way?

This Couch

there is a couch in my living room
that has never been sat on
kept quiet company by silent chairs,
lamps, drapes, overlooked, waiting
for special occasions that rarely arrive.
usually i pass the room preoccupied,
but sometimes notice a changing of light
across the couch's white surface,
a tree branch shadow shaking upon it.

not once was i ever even tempted
to approach and sit. i never gave this couch
a second thought, maybe succumbing
to a silent fear of spilling, or throwing off
the arrangement of shams. but once,

on a night so far buried in midwinter
i'll never remember exactly when,
two of my friends lit the fireplace,
sat down, spilled beer, left tiny stains
just traceable in the voluminous pink light
of morning. when i came home months later,
the marks had disappeared, wounds healed,
as if the couch had drunk the beer in, feeling
the sweet, loose, human onset of drunkenness,
calling out, wait, come back! come back.

For Ray A. Kroc

Outside my window, the stars have fallen
and landed on top of the streetlights.
They cannot hope to compete with the brilliance
of your shining monuments. They rise high
above the expanse of my neighborhood,
blocks and blocks of wires and flat two-story rooftops.
They flicker on at twilight to cast a glow over the night
like confused lighthouses.

Read me bedtime stories, for tonight I am afraid to sleep alone.
Yesterday a flying saucer hovered in my back yard, beamed
thick light into my blue-drenched room, lifted me weightless
above my bed. I floated out the window through shivering
maple leaves and waking birds, confused and seemingly upset
that I now could fly.

When the bulbous silhouettes that dawdled above me asked
to take them to my leader, I pointed like a stern grandmother
saying, I ain't going nowhere. With mute anger they produced
a red and yellow cardboard French fry pouch, shaking
their twelve-inch fingers at it.

At first I thought they were hungry for Earth-food
and wanted to meet the president with full stomachs.
I was wrong -- large screens far overhead
projected surveillance videos from the voyage
to my Midwestern home: highways flanked
every few miles by one of your restaurants,
golden arches rising triumphant above racing semis.

You have conquered the nation! I chuckled at the extraterrestrial
blunder, and instantly forgave them. If I hadn't grown up here,
I would think you ruled the planet, too. It didn't take long
to pile in the car and drive to the nearest McDonald's,
a place where speechless employees once groggy with sleep

prepared super-sized extra value meals. “Good Vibrations” drifted over the restaurant’s empty seats while we waited for hot fries to come up. I showed the aliens the mold of your likeness to the left of the cash register. They nodded solemnly in approval, slurping Coca Colas.

We ate in silence outside, listening to the faint buzz of yellow neon above us. Gusts of wind swung swings on a colorful playground that would be used in a few hours by rambunctious, contented children. We threw our trash into empty wastebaskets and, with a friendly wave, walked off in separate directions. Incredulous faces were pressed against the blurred glass. After one last trip inside for a refill, I looked over my shoulder to see the tall figures disappearing over a hilltop, ambling down the sidewalk, pointing at the buildings like tourists.

How It Is

After Andreas Gursky

This is how it is.
You may never realize,
but this is how it really is.
It is messy, colorless,
warped around the edges,
circles never closed.
I have tried to erase it
but as you can see,
the smeared shadow
refuses to vanish,
that stretched paper
a warning.

There is no black or white.
If you think there is,
you've only surrendered
to the grayness
that we all swim in.

It is only sometimes rendered
in the vocabularies of children.
They can sometimes see it,
but usually people say that
just to be saying it. Those people
have found the easy way out,
and that, of course, is no way out
at all. You can ask questions about it,
but they will only bring you closer
to a truth that can never be contained.

Falling Apart

When I fell apart, everyone expected my blood and muscle to fall out, but instead molten lava oozed from the cracks in my skin, flowed around the room, melted the floor, everyone jumping on furniture so their feet wouldn't melt off.

I melted through the sixth-story floor and fell to the next floor, and those floors fell on the next, until I had hollowed out an entire building. All kinds of people crowded around the entrance to see what the hell was going on inside, putting their hands next to their faces and peering in the dusty windows.

Soon came the cops, busting through doors, looking on all sides, yelping and drawing back to the sidewalk when noticing me, molten lava, was advancing towards their feet. They tried shooting, but I ate the bullets like Oreos.

Soon the small downtown of my city was like an old-fashioned horror movie: everyone running from me, screaming, a woman in a red dress stranded atop a statue, a thin red strap falling off a shivering shoulder.

Flower Nocturne

a flower comes alive
sitting in a clay pot
on an old wooden window
backgrounded by pitch black.
it's cold. the plant would die
if it were outside. the lights
are off. the tenants are asleep.
a glint of pale moonlight streaks
across this empty blue room
to illuminate the flower's white petals.

the flower awoke as the moon emerged
from behind the clouds. so bright
the flower thought it was the sun;
it moved to face it
with quickness unnatural
for a flower, like a human head
perched on the longest, thinnest neck,
turning slowly around.

the moon and the stars are in the window.
the flower sits in front of them. it looks.
they look back.

Flying

Suddenly, the stars are on my level.
The clouds are below. It's four in the morning.
I'm flying across the heartland of the United States.
The world is dark. The wing shakes in the wind,
curving up a little, one blinking light, then infinity.

If I were the pilot, I would steer
up a little more, a little more,
until tightening cabin pressure
awoke the sleeping passengers,
alarmed the wary flight attendants,
and blinded the copilot
as I aimed straight at the crescent moon.

But, my imagination is more daring
than my will. Who knows
how far I could really take it.
I would like to think that
after many years of eluding
frustration, my tolerance
would slip, and I could calmly treat
an assemblage of snoring passengers
to a most romantic conclusion.

But I'm no pilot, and I'm no scientist.
Only in my dreams we could get high enough
to float until something gave,
the plane's slow ascent halted
by the indifferent magnetism
of mother nature.

For Lisa Frank

All I see now
is this slow time off day:
too dark to read,
too bright to turn the lights on.
That time seems like all the time
now, and the cramped feeling
makes me yell in my sleep.

What I do remember is
the biggest snow globe,
the fluff and water emptied
out and replaced by raining fireflies
that fall upwards and the big,
eerie awareness that if we look around
the world really does look like a dome.

That isn't the truth, though. I sleep
only after putting on goggles
that make yesterday look perfect.

The world was really created with four colors:
neon pink, neon purple, neon green, and neon blue.
It was Lisa Frank who sat at the right hand of the Father,
and told Him what to do.

Genuflection

It is ridiculous to try to put this in words.

I emerged from my basement to damp streets.
The storm must have been sudden and light,
because the thought never crossed my mind.
I had stepped outside to go for a midnight walk.
At the time, I couldn't bring myself to do much else.

A welcome coolness had descended on midsummer.
The wind and rain had blown white flower petals
from the trees scattering them down the street,
it looked as if a throng of invisible admirers
had decorated the way. I moved quickly
to distract myself from the unpleasant things
I couldn't stop thinking about. Their intensity
lessened when I realized how much prisoners
must miss things like this. The street was empty.
A meteor could have hurtled straight out of heaven
to strike me down without a soul to witness.

The wet was almost dry. If you knelt on the ground
your pants would be darkened by the sticky dirt.
I know this. I knelt for a minute to look straight up
from the middle of the street at the vanishing clouds.

When I finally rose, my knees cracked.
Searching in the dark spots between foliage,
I walked home briskly. Some invisible force
made my legs move faster. The tingling
abated only after I closed the back door.
What electricity flows from our hearts
when feel we're being watched?

Heat

It is the best to come outside when the light
casts long shadows and the sun glints off the leaves.
There is a time of day when it all comes together.
Sometimes it happens, but not enough.

Sometimes it's just hot. You jump into a pool
and sit calmly on its bottom for as long as your head
will allow, though it's filled with air and wants so bad to float
and resurface. You wave your arms to stay at the bottom,
legs out, looking around as if plopped on the other side
of a zoo exhibit, looking straight up at the light splintering
on the top of the water and feel, for a few moments,
like you really are somewhere else, separate from the world,
looking in, looking up, straight through this waving blue stuff
that rocks you slowly back and forth.

What Actually Happened

I set an incredible wildfire today.
It burned through my neighborhood
and the woods surrounding,
was even observed from outer space,
a black cloud in the middle of green and gray.

I had nothing better to do.
I poured slow dim rainbow colors
in the stream of fuel and watched
as it flowed down the street.
When I dropped the match,
at first it made a slow line of fire
tall as a grown man, flanking the curbs
like it had a mind of its own. It crawled
to lawns, flashing across the dry summer
yards in the blink of an eye. The fire
wrapped around the bushes and trees
outside of my neighbors' windows
and murmured hushed flame sounds
like a concrete wall at night.

At some point, I was the fire, spreading
into the living rooms of my neighbors,
eating the carpet and the wooden furniture,
melting through glass tables and ravaging
full pantries in their kitchens. I wanted
more than anything to sear through a human,
finding one on the edge of a window waiting
to escape, one curled in a corner trying to hide
from the flames, frantic, rolling on the ground
to extinguish my hunger.

But I didn't. And soon I was myself again,
standing alone in the middle of this cul-de-sac
with an empty red container in my hand,

watching the empty houses and yards
flaming silently in the night. No one came
running outside, screaming, “Why! Why!”
It was only me and the burning homes,
the sound of distant cars on the highway
drowning out the insistent crackling
of the flames. I eventually sat on the curb
and rested my head on my hand, sighing
at the new boredom and strangeness
of what actually happened.

The Hard To Wash Places

I told you if I wasn't hugged within five minutes,
that I would explode. Unfortunately, my demands
were not met, and I exploded right then and there.
Instead of littering the sidewalk with bones,
skin, teeth, entrails, tiny, shiny fragments like glitter
popped out like confetti. One half floated out
like a fine shiny snow, landed in a puddle
I blew up in the middle of. The other half
Sailed infinitely outward, straight up and out.
For all we know, it could still be going up.
Others hit the necks of unknowing strangers,
stuck inside the wool of their jackets.

And this is how my afterlife began.
I'll remind you: the pieces of me
were not glitter, but pieces of me.
Skin-soluble, the harmless bits
dissolved in the people, animals,
and plants they hit.

Those hit with good bits felt inexplicable smirks
growing on their faces, sudden feelings
of warmth, urges to compliment strangers.
Those hit with the bad lost their patience,
grew discontent, paced around fuming,
did not know what had come over them.

As you were standing in front of me,
you were hit with more parts than anyone.
You brushed the specks from your glasses like sand.
Some fragments dissolved into your eyes, your mouth,
under your fingernails, behind your ears, and all
the other hard-to-wash places. From now on
I will be a part of all things you do.
Other hands on your waist will pick them up;

I will become part of them, too. In this way,
I will disperse throughout the entire planet.

The last parts of me smoked out
and became the air, the air everywhere
that everyone can breathe anytime
if they only think about me
and suck it in.

