

Astral Weeks

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1

In 1688 the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer invented the term *nostalgia* from the Greek *nostos*, or “homecoming,” and *algos*, or “pain.” The word was used in his dissertation to describe “the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one's native land,” a condition also known as *mal du Suisse* after frequent reports of Swiss mercenaries in the lowlands of France and Italy succumbing to a melancholic longing for Alpine landscapes. Napoleon believed that the sentiments suffered by his soldiers upon hearing the Swiss milking song “Khue-Reyen” would lead them to desert or to commit suicide, and so declared its playing punishable by death.

2

Whether it was intentionally or by accident I'm not quite sure (the memory is cloudy now), but it was certainly my father who introduced me to *Astral Weeks*. It is either that he presented the CD to me with his own two hands on our front porch just as he was returning home, or that I found it independently while exploring his unpacked belongings after I'd followed him inside the house. At present I have a feeling that it was the latter—I most likely found the record amongst a slew of others that he'd brought home that day (maybe including Elvis Costello, Wilson Pickett, or Joan Armatrading) and gravitated to it simply because of its soothing cover art: a thick black border, deep purple lettering, fine silhouettes of small leaves overlapping the hazy image of a man with long auburn hair and a pale blue shirt. Either way, I remember that my father was responsible for bringing the swirling melodies and stream-of-consciousness lyricism of Van Morrison's second studio album into my life. I also remember that I was five years old when it happened, and that it happened in August, so it was flooding season, and that it was only the third time I'd seen my father in my life.

3

The application for the college I now attend was composed of a series of short-answer prompts that in a more just and tender world would have allowed for long answers. One of them demanded, “Tell us where you have lived—and for how long—since you were born; whether you've always lived in the same place, or perhaps in a variety of places.” Emails my high school guidance counselor has saved from the process show that under duress, I compressed my lived experiences into fewer than 325 characters and responded,

I was born in Manila. When I was 8, my family was able to relocate to Honolulu, where my father had been working as a car salesman my whole life. I grew there for 5 years, perfecting the glottal stop and playing ukulele for dimes at Waikiki. When I was 13, we moved to San Antonio. I've been in love with brisket ever since.

In hindsight I can forgive my seventeen-year-old self for hamming and mugging my adolescence into the cloying brevity of the last three sentences, but the guilt from reducing the first eight years that I knew my father to a single line is not as easy to soothe.

4

In the first volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator is sent into a bout of recollection by the taste of a madeleine cookie dipped in tea. The narrator notes that he has seen madeleine pastries many times throughout the course of his life, but that he has not tasted them (especially not dipped in tea) since he was a small child. The moment of tasting once again the particular combination of cookie and tea connects him backward to a profound sensation localized in one era of his life. The potency of the sensation had been preserved in memory, distinctly untouched—and thus undiluted—by any comparable experience since.

5

Contemporary critics have praised *Astral Weeks* for its arrangements, which blend elements of classical, blues, folk, and jazz, as well as for its songwriting, which has widely been characterized as impressionistic. The album's lyrics reference geographic locations in and around Morrison's hometown of Belfast, and deal with themes of earthly love, heavenly ideals, dreams, and the nature of memory.

Like many singer-songwriter projects of the late 1960s and early 1970s, *Astral Weeks* can be classified as a concept album, and more specifically, a song cycle—a collection of individually complete songs designed to be performed and appreciated in sequence as a single unit of music.

6

Every evening in the week ensuing, I would ask my father to play *Astral Weeks* on the stereo (each evening I told him that the first song we listened to was his choice, but he always played the album from its beginning, the title song, without skipping ahead). Afterwards, I'd sit on his knee with my hands in my lap, remaining very quiet and trying to seem like I was truly paying attention to the music, even though I was five years old and English was my second language, so I was unable to understand even half of the words being sung. Then, some time around the end of the second song on the album, "Beside You," when Van Morrison sings the lines,

Why it's got to be
It has to be
And I'm beside you
Beside you
Oh child

I would begin to weep without control and beg my father not to leave home again, Please stay home, why do you always go to work for so long, why do you only come home when it rains.

My father was prepared for such a moment (I believe he experienced a similar situation earlier each day that week with my mother and the lines “Please be mine/Share my life/Stay with me/Be my wife” in David Bowie’s “Be My Wife”). As Morrison wailed the last melisma of “Beside you/Child,” my father would cradle me in his arms and begin to bob up and down with the opening of the following song.

7

“Sweet Thing” was written during Morrison’s year-long separation from his future wife Janet after returning to Belfast from a tour in the United States in 1966. Morrison has said that the song is “not about anybody in particular but about a feeling.” In comparison to the otherworldly longing featured in the songs that precede it on the album, “Sweet Thing” demonstrates an attempt to accept and even celebrate the physical realm. The narrator places himself in a pastoral setting of blue oceans and “gardens all misty wet with rain,” declaring plans “just to dig it all and not to wonder why” because he will “never grow so old again.” Affirming that he will “be satisfied not to read in between the lines,” the narrator appears to plead with himself to accept his earthly reality and calm the questions of his mind in order to understand the fugitive beauty in his worldly circumstances.

It is the only song on *Astral Weeks* that discusses future events rather than past.

8

Every year on the last night of my father’s week-long visit home, I unearthed *Astral Weeks* from a dust-covered box of paper clips and yellowing receipts on top of the refrigerator. Before bedtime, my father and I would enjoy the entirety of the album together—the abiding three-chord blues of “Cyprus Avenue,” the endlessly descending twilight-state progressions of “Madame George,” the twinkling xylophone and gurgling bass of “Ballerina.” The other songs on the album never became my favorites, but I listened to them anyway, wanting only to breathe quietly against my father’s shoulder with my toes anchored in the empty belt loops of his worn linen shorts. In later years, I would relish suffering through the odd jazz and baroque self-destruction of “Slim Slow Slider” while standing on top of my father’s feet, swaying back and forth together in irregular rhythm like the tide of floodwater that flowed into and receded from the space beneath the front door on especially hard-pouring days.

9

The box that contained my childhood CD collection was lost, I think, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean by the company my family hired to transport our belongings to America.

10

At college, I live by myself in a room with one window on the top floor of an old house. The people who live in the rooms next to mine are people I don’t know, but who are polite enough when I encounter them in passing. I am either busy or ill most of the time, and write poems in a small notebook when there’s no one around for conversation, which is often. I try not to indulge my self-

pity too much on days when the sun sets before 5pm, and to call home twice a month. Plane tickets cost money that I don't have.

11

My family's house in Honolulu was big and dry and clean, with a wide driveway where my father parked his car every day when he came home from his job managing the dealership down the road. The house was equipped with cable television, and so there was always the sight and the sound of English-language comedies, cartoons, commercials filling our free time. Every day on the way to school or while running errands around town, my family tuned the car radio to "High-def 96.1: Top 40 Hits." Life was the same in San Antonio.

For ten years, we lived our lives together.

12

Near the end of the summer before my third year of college, I visit home for one week for the first time in a year and a half. A long storm is beginning to settle in over the city on the night that I arrive, and my father greets me at the airport wearing an oversized blue plastic poncho splattered with raindrops. My face becomes wet as he embraces me.

I know you're sorry that it's been such a long time, he says to me while I cry silently into his shoulder.

13

In another time

In another place

In another time

In another place

In another face

14

My father and I spend Saturday afternoon together at the used-books store across town. In the CD section, while combing through the markdowns bin, I catch sight of something familiar: a thick black border, deep purple lettering, the delicate outline of little leaves laid across the forehead and chin of a titian-haired man in dreamy blue fabric. It is Van.

My father drives us toward home from the bookstore as the street lamps flicker on along the backstreet. I switch the radio off and put *Astral Weeks* into the CD player.

Start from the beginning, my father says.

I roll the passenger-side window down to let in some of the drizzle.