



Neutral Milk Hotel

“The Fool”

*In the Aeroplane Over
the Sea*

02/1998

Merge / Domino

The Fool

Dustin Heron

When my mom died, I tried to put my feelings into song. Not that I wrote music, or would sing, but I found myself compelled to identify a song that could stand in for my feelings, which were distant and dark and which scared me. I don't know why this was, the thing with the music. But maybe it's that when CD players were new, we joined Columbia House and got 10 CD's for a dollar, if we promised to buy so many more. We were a few years behind everyone else in getting a CD-playing stereo and it felt like a big deal for us, to open that strangely large box and find something brand-new inside. And then we joined a music club and bought some CD's and after a few weeks a long, square box arrived and it was like we'd finally entered the '90s. All I'd wanted was Pearl Jam's *Vs* but my mom got me *Led Zeppelin IV* as well, a surprise, and, she said, an essential part of any record collection.

I'd never listened to Zeppelin before. The cover was inscrutable. A dour peasant bent under a bundle of sticks in a grey-washed landscape. Yawn. The back cover was more promising, with a wizardly fellow holding a lantern. Wizards, I could do. The CD sat for a while unplayed but eventually became the soundtrack to a sad, lonely boyhood, a vessel to hold sexual frustration and poverty anger and body issues. Shredding guitar solos and stoner rock would play in the background for the entirety of my teenage years, and be the catalyst for several long-term friendships. Sometimes I thought about my mom, a teenager, driving everyone from kegger to kegger in her VW Bus, blasting the Stairway solo on 8-Track, and, just as it did for me, as I rode with my friends all over that same town, the music becoming the throbbing howl of youth. But, though I'll always think of her when I hear it, that's all Zeppelin could be for—my youth and angst; it couldn't hold what I was feeling when she died.

I listened to a lot of obvious songs, like “Ripple,” or “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” But no matter the beauty or depth of the music nothing stirred in that deep, cavernous self of mine whose cold dread demanded to be echoed into the world. I raged and I drank and I went to grad school. I tried to write about it, my mom's death, but most of what I wrote was so folded up and obscured—so afraid was I of feeling those feelings—that it failed to be an outlet. So I searched through music—not consciously, no, but I was always listening for that song that would say it for me, all I couldn't say myself.

Anyway, once again late to things, I finally heard Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*. I don't remember when, or how, or whom. I found it on my search. It came to me when it did. Track 5, “The Fool,” an instrumental lasting only 1:53, is my song. The song I'd been looking for, the anthem that describes my mom's death. It crawls out of the previous song, “Two Headed Boy,” as if it'd been living there all along. The opening horns are stately and mournful. The whole song is ceremonial, marching with purpose towards its blaring end, and the procession is grave but alive, a stoic facing their fate. Even when it slows halfway through you are trumpeted on, reminded, encouraged, it'll be okay, you are loved, so loved, we all must die. The skies are red, the mountains black. My mom had been dead for years but “The Fool” felt like I'd always felt: doomed, and determined, and a little ridiculous.

Nothing was released, though. I realize now I believed that if I found a song that spoke my feelings clearly, I would be free of them. Though deep down & always I might be "The Fool,"—teeth gritted, eyes forward, undeterred and single-minded and voiceless—my heart did not unbreak on those final notes. Alas, it is broken still.