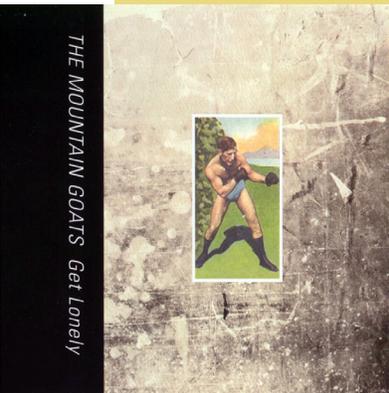


Kanye West
 “Stronger”
Graduation
 09/2007
 Def Jam · Roc-A-Fella



The Mountain Goats
 “Wild Sage”
Get Lonely
 08/2006
 4AD
 ...and other artists

See You in September

After “Wild Sage” by The Mountain Goats

Katie Darby Mullins

—of course, now school starts in August,
 And I don't sing of summer love,
 I tuck a cane between my seat and the door
 “Just in case” —because last year
 I was on a walker, last year
 All I could do was listen to “Swim”
 By Jack's Mannequin and pray that air
 Would eventually fill my lungs again
 In a way that wasn't so exhausting,
 I wasn't sure who Katie-post-stroke was—

—it used to be Kanye, you know? Every
 Year, I started with “Stronger,” built my own
 Legend-of-Katie-Darby-Mullins and created
 A persona to act out on the classroom,
 Someone who never needed notes
 Or forgot a word and stuttered until
 Stroke-rattled, her brain gave up, someone
 Who never broke their tailbone in front
 Of an entire classroom. Someone who didn't need
 A student to help take care of her. No,
 I was “you should be honored by my lateness.”
 I was “there's a thousand 'you's, there's only one of me”—

—I loved sucking that power in like
 A cigarette, heady and knees-weak, ready
 To be back in the classroom, the only
 Performance that never gave me stage fright—

—until it did. *See you in September, or lose you...*
 I was talking to myself. No voice is harsher
 Than me to me, the brain to the shell,
 Both now cracked in different ways.
 Once, I had a Mountain Goats lyric
 In permanent marker on a desk that said
 “It's gonna take you people years
 To recover from all of the damage”
 And I thought that's who I was, an unnatural
 Disaster, something like a tornado

In fifty minute bits, able to give small
Parts of myself and shield anything
Too vulnerable. I don't know how
To do that anymore—

—how to tell only

Appropriate stories, what to omit to make
Students more comfortable. I know some
Have seen me at my worst, one even saw
My shoulder fall out of socket, and I can't
Get my mouth to form the apology
I want to give them. They saw moments
I wish they hadn't, when I wasn't
Really ready to see them, but I had to:
That's what you do in September. One student,
As uncomfortable with fear as I am,
Focused, fought with me to bring
My brain back to classroom-ready
Whether my body ever made it there—

—Or not. And better, he pretended—

Maybe he really believed—
Everything would be all right, and we could
Fix this if we just tried hard enough.

Do it. Harder.

Better.

Faster.

Stronger.

—it's not Kanye anymore. The girl
Who bought that CD, I see her in pictures
And sometimes, I think, *sweetheart*,
You have no idea, and other times I hate
Her, and I am allowed to hate her. My ghost
Arm that can only feel pain, my eye
That won't fully open or close—

—Sometimes I think she caused it, those sleepless
Nights, causing a competition
Between brain and body and there are no winners
And there were never going to be
Winners—

— but I can change

The radio dial, change the message

So that I don't have to be powerful like a plague
To step into the classroom.
My new permanent marker line—
It's Mountain Goats, too, but not unyielding.
A friend embroidered it for me and I touch
The raised red stitches to try—

Try to burn these words into my whole body,
The part of my brain that stays awake,
The hand that still has enough sensation
To figure out the phrase. And every
Time I think the line "somedays I think I'd feel better
If I tried harder/ Most days
I know that's not true," I try
To make a vow to myself, no different
Than standing at an altar—

—because I know I am trying
As hard as I can, but the voice
Says "never enough." Says "show them
The blood." Says "It's gonna take you people years."
I think of my husband, who said "in sickness"
Before he said "in health;"
But I also think of my classroom, my other
World, my records and mini-guitar strewn
Around my ADA compliant office,
And I know that the student I worried
Most, the one I owe the biggest
Apology—wouldn't accept it and doesn't think
He's done anything special.

Permit me one more line from "Wild Sage,"
Not just the one about trying. Let me
Scratch into my disobedient pupil
What I think what my husband
And student saw all summer—

"And I stare at the scrape on the heel
Of my hand / Til it doesn't sting so much / And
Until the blood's dry." It was slow
Watching me move through those stages,
And it has to have scared them. But—
"When somebody asks if I'm OK, I don't know what to say"—

—they never made me pretend
To feel any less broken or scared than I was.

There is danger in the summer moon above?
Always. But never like the girl in the song,
Never that I might run away or disappear,
Abandon my family and beautiful life,
That I wouldn't show up, no matter what,
The glorious day school finally went back.

—For me, that summer moon
Was a bomb, and I had to figure out
Which wires to cut and what to connect
Because I love my school life,
My students who care about people and empathy, who are
Learning to tell better stories—
Learning the summer moon,
The loves they find and abandon,
The guitars they play or leave to collect dust,
They are learning *while we're away*
Don't forget to write,
And that, by some magic and hard
Work, I'll see them in September
For as long as they'll have me,
Even if that means dragging my braced
Body to the library on a cane—
Even if that means, occasionally,
One will still slip and show fear against his will—

—I am learning slowly that concern
Is its own type of love, that
Harder, better, stronger, faster, that's a lie
And that these moments, where fear
Flickers across their face and then
Is back in the deck like a street magician's card
Trick: those moments made me fall
In love with school in the first place:
Those brilliant connections.
Waiting to see what happened on summer vacation,
And then, learning that I am a puzzle—
I don't know what to say. I'll see you when the summer's through.
And thank God, the summer
Always ends, the bell always rings

And I can start with a new song any time.