

On a Maddening Loop

C.C. Russell

I see her puffy winter coat, navy blue. She is swallowed by it, swimming in it. I see these halfhearted snowflakes falling haphazardly around us. I see her eyes—they were tired. We were so tired. Her hair was pulled back into a severe sort of ponytail. Her bare fingers shivered.

In my head this is the last time that we spoke, though I know there were others that followed; quick, awkward conversations when we would pass each other. But there is a finality here in this moment. I knew it enough at the time—those certain neurons firing: File this away. It will come back to this. You will want to remember all of this moment. This freezing cold sidewalk, the traffic slowly passing behind her, all of these layers between us—a lot of protection but no real warmth.

As I walked away, I turned my discman on. “Country Feedback” by R.E.M. I couldn’t have timed it better if I had filmed it, if I had synched up the soundtrack just so. There I am, walking away from her, the sound swelling as she retreats out of the frame.

R.E.M.’s album *Out of Time* came out in March of 1991. It’s a spring album, not this particular winter memory I have of it. I remember buying it day one in that small-town Pamida store. Cassette because they didn’t yet have it on CD, the first album that I would own on multiple formats.

Years later my car’s stereo would eat the tape in the middle of “Losing My Religion” and I would punch the dashboard so hard that I would bruise my knuckles. My friend in the passenger seat would ask me if I was ok and I would offhandedly reply I was fine. Not yet ready to talk about anger, about every emotion that I funneled towards anger because I was too afraid of it otherwise.

The first time that J. and I really talked was in early summer, her birthday party. A week later I called her from a payphone in the rain in Virginia. It was so perfectly filmic. My gut fluttered. It had to mean something.

At one point in our relationship, we decided to buy different albums—always so sure that our discographies would one day be combined. In the initial negotiations, she chose U2. I chose R.E.M.

“Country Feedback” is an elegant mess of a song. It cycles through anger and blame, begging, a bleak sort of yearning, and eventually crawls towards a sort of resolution. It is obvious from the first lines that this is never going to work out for these lovers. They have tried everything. *Fake breakdowns, self-help, plastics, collections...* It’s time to walk away. But they don’t want to, not now that it has come to this. *It’s crazy what you could have had, crazy what you could have had. I need this. I need this.* The repetition feeds the bitter inability to let it go. The song feeds on itself as it devolves.

I remember a particular Thanksgiving. I overhear her mother as I come around the corner telling her not to get too attached. “He’s fickle. He won’t stick around.” It made me angry in the way that only truth can. Too many years passed before I could admit that she had me pegged. I couldn’t tell J. by then but she knew. Of course she knew.



R.E.M.

“Country Feedback”

Out of Time

03/1991

Warner Bros. / Concord
Records

"Country Feedback" is a fickle song in its own way. The song's narrator "needs" this. But does he want it anymore? He's the one who has caused the relationship to fall apart in some way—*these clothes don't fit us right and I'm to blame*. He's worn out, walking away while whining that it is what he still needs. In the end, it's the narrator who is making this choice though it doesn't feel like a choice anymore. There's an innate selfishness to the song. The narrator is, in many ways, the villain of the story. I'm sure that there is an apology buried in the narrative, but if so it comes much later than the final notes we are given.

In the last photograph that I ever took of J., she is in the off-campus trailer that I lived in, the one where the pipes would freeze, where we would wear our coats indoors all winter. She's wearing that same puffy navy blue from my memory. You can tell that it is our last winter together because her middle finger is up, raised towards the camera lens and who is behind it. It doesn't look like a playful gesture.

"Country Feedback" denotes a better history behind its dissolve. As with any story, there had to be a happiness that led to this mad clinging to something that has fallen apart. But our stories so often aren't about that. They're about blame, about anger. They're about a failure to resolve anything. It's such a familiar narrative arc, one we tell over and over. It's how we survive our own stories when it becomes clear that we are the villain. It's an odd way to apologize, but in a way that's what it sometimes is. *It's crazy what you could have had. I need this. I need this.*