

Sometimes I'm Above Water but Mostly I'm at Sea

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It is September and the waves of the Atlantic keep coming, and coming, and coming; I am safe the whole time, though I feel compelled by the unrelenting tide to keep asking myself whether I am still safe. The ocean is cold and swollen enough that I have to dive with the passing of each wave, feet never quite touching the bottom. Three other swimmers are bobbing just like I am, and we shout between quick breaths. We drift apart as we tread. Whenever I can I glance back at the shore, looking for my house, the pitch of the roof visible above the crest of the dune. The tide is gentle, yet I am certain in the moment before I turn and find my beacon that I have been carried miles away. Then another wave. I dive. When I break through the surface of the water I have just enough time to wipe the salt from my eyes and breathe before I must dive again. The waves begin to overwhelm me, the effort of facing them. Everything feels far away: my companions, the shore, the house. And I realize to stay in the water I will have to dive and breathe and dive and breathe and dive and breathe without end. But the water is cool and the sun is hot, and I am swimming, and nothing is wrong. This should be nice.

It's an ache and it shines through me

A swallow in a cage

Sylvan Esso sets to music the astonishing sadness that sometimes comes with being alive. The empty recognition of objective goodness. The frustration with what disparity exists between the joy one sees and the joy one feels. Their album *What Now*, on which "Slack Jaw" appears as the ninth of 10 songs, was released two weeks after I got dumped. It is slow, even languorous, and comes after eight electro pop tracks whose fast tempos and heavy production often belie the depth and darkness of their lyrics.

I was gonna die young

(I had it all planned out before you met me)

Now I gotta wait for you, honey

(I had a plan, you ruined it completely)

Not long after their album release Sylvan Esso put out *Echo Mountain Sessions*—an EP with "Slack Jaw," and three other songs from *What Now*, performed by a full band. The song's intro, a ticking metronome that carries the first minute and a half, became a single note played on piano. Ringing, then hollow, over and over. Lead vocalist Amelia Meath has spoken about her songs as a love letter to the listener: Here you go, we made this for you. Let it take you away for a little while. The first time I heard *Echo Mountain Sessions*, I listened to "Slack Jaw" six times. I laid on the floor halfway through. I'd spent so much time crying by then, and the song felt like someone else was finally crying for me.

Is it a sign? Or just a landmine?

Or a feeling roaming free?

It's overtaken me

It's just me there, in the ocean. The bobbing heads that once belonged to my girlfriend and our guests are now like the bright outlines of seagulls floating. I am no longer breathing between dives but gasping, and I don't shout when I decide to pull myself along



Sylvan Esso

"Slack Jaw"

What Now

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the backs of the waves, heading for the sand. Soon I am collapsed into a towel, a heap, chest and throat burning. From the shore, the ocean seems calm and the waves roll softly up the sloping sand. The sound of them is staticky. For a moment I wonder if any of it was real.

*I got all the parts I wished for
I've got everything I need
Sometimes I'm above water
But mostly I'm at sea*

Sylvan Esso played "Slack Jaw" live when I saw them in 2017, and again in 2018, but I don't remember hearing it. The feeling of the sound couldn't permeate the thickness of the crowd—not like it does in my apartment, vinyl spinning on my cheap turntable with the volume cranked up as loud as it will go. There, the sound becomes the room, becomes the woman I lost years ago, and the one who just moved as far across the world as one can go without falling off it. The sound becomes all the water between us, the vastness of which I have no way to understand. The sound becomes the love I hid from her, and the answer to it.

*If it's me I cannot give up
I'd rather that she stayed*

In an interview, Amelia told *All Songs Considered* that her "favorite manifestation of heartbreak is wanting to be a piece of music." I found "Slack Jaw" at a time when I didn't feel I was alive, nor did I want to be; the song paid homage to that kind of darkness, made it something impossibly beautiful, and it made me hurt less for three minutes and five seconds.

When I lie on my floor and hear the music and the music becomes an ocean and I am lifted from my body—I know that she has done this for me and I let my lips move with the shape of her words, though what I'm really saying is *thank you*.