

# Rear View Mirrors

Steve Merino

Ashley and I spend four hours on a Friday night after work driving to Madison, Wisconsin, in a rented Ford Fiesta with a driver side mirror that shakes the whole way like it's trying to tell us something. When we arrive at the three-story house on Brearly Street, our friend Nate comes to the door and starts flashing the porch light the way my mother used to on summer nights to call me back home from the neighbor's house. We go inside, drop our bags on the wood floor with a thud, and Nate hugs us like he misses us because he does. He introduces us to his roommates and they hug us because they know Nate misses us and they care about Nate and his happiness, so they welcome us to this place they all currently call home.

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Around a table we drink beer from cans and play Secret Hitler, a game where the point is to discover who's a Fascist and who's a Liberal to ultimately stop Hitler being elected Chancellor. When I flip over my player card, I discover I'm Hitler first which, to be honest, is extremely anxiety-inducing. The whole point of the game hinges on everyone figuring out who I am and this makes me, in a sort of secretive way, the center of attention. My palms begin to sweat and I crack my knuckles as an attempt to calm down, but it's no use, everyone is shouting and arguing, accusing one another of being the enemy, of backstabbing and lying in the name of winning, which I suppose is actually quite accurate. Eventually, after a lot of back and forth, I'm elected to the position of Chancellor so my team, the Fascists, wins. It takes me a bit to get over the initial shock of being, once again, the center of everyone's focus, but when I do I feel less uncomfortable. My pulse steadies and I feel cradled by these people who have welcomed us like family.

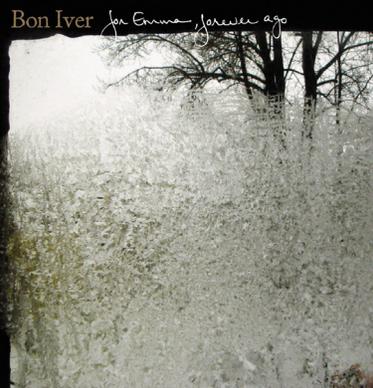
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In the morning we drive from Madison to Milwaukee to see the band Bon Iver play a 10-year anniversary show of an album I have loved for the past nine years. There's something about music that always helps ground me in a specific time and location. I assume that's one of the universal powers of music; the ability to transport a person to somewhere else, to help a person recall pure moments of heightened emotion.

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I found this album the summer I had just finished my first year of college. I had signed a lease with some friends for a duplex a few blocks off campus. I can be rather impatient so instead of waiting, I decided to move all my things in as soon as I could in June before any of my roommates. At first it was wonderful, this kind of independence that comes with having to remember to buy toilet paper and figuring out how to set up internet, but after a few days I was overtly aware of the fact I was in this empty house with no one. An old house that echoed and creaked at odd times as if the walls were trying to shout something back to me through the silence. One of the first things I hung in my room was an owl clock I found at Goodwill. The hands of the clock moved loudly, in an almost violent way, and at night while the rest of the house was quiet I would listen to these hands push the world forward. I was alone and also lonely.

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Bon Iver

Various

For Emma, Forever Ago

07/2007

Jagjaguwar

The album opens with a single guitar strumming softly. A simple progression of notes that, in the grand scheme of music history, are of little impress. The album was written during a period of isolation and sickness in a cabin in the woods and the first few notes bring you there, to this cabin surrounded by snow, wood burning in the corner to keep the place warm. By the end of the first song I remember being close to tears because in that moment, I was convinced no song would ever be as beautiful as that opening song. Or maybe because it's easier to submit completely to an emotion without fear of judgement when alone.

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As the album progressed goosebumps began cropping up on my arms, shivers were thrown down my spine and small exhales of breath escaped from my nose. The notes from one moment to the next existed in a time both finite and infinite, here and everywhere, forever, and to me that's bordering on perfection. In the span of nine songs the singer captured both beauty and pain. Love and longing. All abstractions that felt realized completely. I didn't know then if my emotions would ever be strong enough to compel me to open my chest and bleed to the world through art. How scary it is to feel everything honestly and be completely seen by others.

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We're at the show in Milwaukee, sitting up a way and to the right of the stage. As the first notes of the opening song echo through the room the stage lights pulse in a slow but deliberate fashion as if to remind me that this music is in me, these lyrics, each turn from verse to chorus. But also the emotions. The pain and love. All of this has been there for a while, sleeping perhaps, hibernating through some uncommonly long winter, hiding out in a cabin waiting to escape, but like the layout of an old friend's basement or a first kiss, these songs aren't something I can unlearn.

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Not surprisingly, the place is packed and we're surrounded by hundreds of fans who are here for, I assume, similar reasons as me and my friends—to reminisce. To be reminded of a forgotten place or emotion. To feel. Every person in attendance is connected by the commonality of the experience, it's something I love about watching live music; no matter what is happening in our own heads, we're all watching the same thing at the same moment. What separates us all in attendance the most, I think, is the people we're with. I'm at the show with the small group of people I've chosen and oddly enough they've chosen me too. And I'm listening to this music that I love and enjoy but that also resurfaces sad memories. This music that reminds me of loss and pain and yet makes me hopeful for what comes after the pain. What comes in between and before. Songs that make me believe that love is something that can be both large and small, fleeting and all consuming. But still it's funny to put all these contradicting emotions next to each other, funny how these feelings can coexist in certain spaces, in the space of nine songs.

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While we're listening to these songs I think of how there were people in my life who I still love but who make me sad. I think we all have these people, friends who've drifted away. Maybe it's someone we still see them all the time. Or someone who doesn't have social media and lives in a new state so exists simply as a ghost. Maybe there are things in the past left unsaid. Maybe there's a letter they wrote still sitting in the corner, refused to be read. Or maybe there's nothing that can be explained as to what went wrong, just a fading, a slow departure, two people choosing different paths. It's obvious to me that the

world works in dualities, but I wonder sometimes if any of these past friendships existed at all. And if they did, how is it possible that realities can be lost to everything but memory?

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The first time I heard this album I didn't know if I'd ever hurt the way the lead singer hurt. Didn't know if I'd ever be ok with opening myself up to people knowing that sometimes the outcome is watching what had once materialized eventually disintegrate. But listening to these songs in the company of people who I've chosen, people who love me and who I love, I realize I'm not alone because I choose not to be. The songs filling this space are memories, a way to keep safe even the most broken of moments and they remind me that there is safety in people, but also a fragility. Look, I have hurt people and people have hurt me. I'm sure I will hurt and be hurt again. I've had to say goodbye when I didn't want to and I've lied when making promises. I am just one person and I take up only so much space. For so long I've defined my experiences by the spaces I'm in rather than the people I'm with, but I sense that changing.

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The morning after the show back in Madison we take the path by the lake to get juice from a small shop. Nate and I talk about the books we're reading and his roommate Evan walks a few feet behind us with his dog. On the walk Nate and Evan run into a few people they know and exchange hellos before we keep walking. Everything feels slower here in Madison. I check my watch, not in an anxious way, but as a way to simply ensure the passage of time. The weekend has felt suspended, like it's been floating in the space outside of time. I know we should be getting back to Saint Paul, but I don't feel stressed about Ashley and I lingering here or any compelling urge to leave. I don't feel anxious in this place with these people and I'm anxious all the time.

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When we say goodbye to Nate we are unsure when we'll see him again. He's moving to the UK soon so we promise to visit before then and I hope we do. As we pull away from the house on Brearly, Nate waves to us with a smile that is both happy and sad.

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Back on the highway the driver mirror of our Ford Fiesta is shaking again. I understand now it's been attempting to wake us up, serving as a constant reminder that it's ok to let things go, to say goodbye. To let the past rest. True friendship moves with you, or more likely, moves where you choose to move it. Love, new and old, lost and found again, is contained and kept safe in memory. The memory released from the pores through music. Released in the time it takes to move from one note of a song to the next. Ashley and I each roll our windows down, we let the wind fill the car and hold our bodies. I put on some sad songs that linger in this space and then float out behind us as we drive home.