I Am Listening to Hear Where You Are

John Brown
In response to a prompt in English Class, my friend Dan said that “Holland, 1945” was the perfect song. I didn’t get it. It sounded like noise to me. When I finally listened to the In the Aeroplane Over the Sea all the way through, I wanted to be married and buried to it. It is that much joy and sorrow packed into a song that sounds like the Buzzcocks-do-Balkans-do-mariachi. About twice a year, I thank Dan profusely for introducing me to it. He gives an awkward look, shuffles his feet a little, and tries to walk away. It is strange that someone I used to get into regular fist-fights with would introduce me to such a life-changing work. We sort of connected over the album, though, after we were through that stage. But only sort of. In a way, I have been searching for someone to connect to deeply over this album, as deeply as I’ve connected to it. I used to carelessly lend it to people, possibly driving some away. I was set up on a date with this girl, Lynsey, my sophomore year of high school. But by some providence, when I lent her In the Aeroplane, it began one of the most gratifying, beautiful, painful, torturous friendships I have ever had or ever will.

Love is a strange and awful. I loved Lynsey. I never loved my first and only serious girlfriend. I told her I loved her, I tried to express it to the best of my abilities, but the feeling wasn’t there. She was young, and because of that, I probably royally fucked her up. But I loved Lynsey. Passionately, deeply, unconditionally, uncontrollably. At certain points in our friendship, you could probably call what we had an emotional relationship. But I was as awkward and clumsy as the boy in “Two Headed Boy”, fumbling in the dark with the one he loves on a sexual misadventure, as Jeff Mangum strains to capture all of that emotion in his frail voice; but the damage I caused was a deeper kind. I wanted all of Lynsey; I wanted her deeply sexual side in addition to her emotional side. I was young
enough to think that if I waited long enough I could marry her. In keeping with the album, I had no idea how silly this sounded with my youth and inexperience. I became so consumed with the idea of a family with her that I turned into a monster; driving her friends, my friends, and finally her away from me for some time.

In the Aeroplane is very much about the missteps and stumbles of adolescence. Sex is everywhere, and the act of it is clumsy and exploratory. Parents are monsters, siblings are martyrs. Underneath it all is this great yearning for something you cannot explain and will never be able to. Sometimes, it feels like greatness in incubation; others, it feels like some piece of ancient knowledge locked away. But as I grow, this feeling is subverted by a sense of settling and compromise, where this feeling gets buried under bonds, bills, and responsibilities of the modern world. As an adult, you cannot understand. I can still touch and taste my adolescence, from the first awkward attempts at intimacy to the inevitable pain of growing up. I understand I will lose touch with this if I do not make a regular effort to reach out to it. I am not sure whether that effort helps me or hurts me. Probably both.

I recently went on a date with a girl called Lena. She’s beautiful. She has dirty blond hair with feathers tied into it, and the most gorgeous array of sweaters draped over this thin, elegant frame. She has this voice that on first listen sounds airy and aloof, but as I got to know it I began to understand that it was just at a supreme state of relaxation. She loves Frida, red wine, and moonlight. At the time I met her, I had been listening to a lot of Van Morrison, and it was as if she had stepped out of Astral Weeks. When we first met in this one once-a-week class, she seemed really engaged in me, but me not so much in her. As we got to know each other, this reversed. She hasn’t returned a call in two weeks, despite being civil and possibly flirty in class. She believes in forest spirits and Mother Earth. I’m a very lapsed Catholic and a worshiper at the altar of science. She enchanted me though.

On In the Aeroplane, “King of Carrot Flowers Pts. 2 & 3” opens with the repeated phrase, sang at the top of his voice, of “I love you Jesus Christ.” This part used to make me uncomfortable.
Mangum stated in the liner notes that he wasn’t being ironic or in character when he sang this; he honestly loves Jesus Christ. After a disastrous Catholic education, Christianity left a bad taste in my mouth. Now, though, I envy his faith. I envy his ability to believe and have an answer to the yearning and the pain. I envy the hope that faith brings. By extension, I envy Lena, even if I found her beliefs to be hokum. Because of this I wanted to tell her everything. I thought that she would get In the Aeroplane. We got back to my room and started listening to records. I put on In the Aeroplane and sat next to her, leaned up against my dresser. I don’t know what I expected to happen. Maybe she’d exclaim in the utter wonder of discovery. Maybe she’d look deep into my eyes and find a soul like hers. Maybe she’d kiss me outright. She said, “Oh, I know these guys. I like them.” it could not have been worse if she hated them. At least we would have had something to talk about.

I switched to Bon Iver and set a romantic mood. There was a moment, a fleeting, overpowering moment, where things would have happened between us, where a kiss and a passion could develop, and from there something more than a kiss and a passion, something so unattainable for me that I fail to describe it. But it passed in an awkward stream of half-mumbled jokes and stares at the floor. I felt her disappointment. She probably felt mine earlier. It was in these two climaxes of emotion, desire, and embarrassment that I realized that I was still in some way trapped in the glass jar mentioned so often in the album.

In some way, I felt that if Lena and I had similar souls, she could restore my faith. For a year or two now, I have been on a sort of quest to find it again, and she seemed like the answer. The speaker in In The Aeroplane Over the Sea thought he had the answers at the beginning, but by the final song, “Two Headed Boy, Pt. 2”, he is in the same place I am. “God is a place where you’ll wait for the rest of your life.” I lost God in tiny increments, with every cruel act I witnessed in person, with every state-sanctioned murder on the news, with every preacher and pope condemnation. I have yet to find a counterexample with a same power.

I do not just love this album; it is a part of me. And part of me wonders if it has a path for me that I can’t escape. The same last
song ends with the speaker, the Two Headed Boy, being cared for by a woman who feeds him “tomatoes and radio wires” and they, “Retire to sheets safe and clean.” But even with all of his wants and all of his needs seen to with the greatest of care, he still admonishes, “Don’t hate her when she gets up to leave.” Even as a kid, I never believed in fate, but as things become less clear as I acclimate to adulthood, I don’t know what to believe. Ultimately, I wonder if there is a good reason why no one feels the same for In the Aeroplane. Maybe there’s a part of people that I never had that protects them from that sort of investment, at least of the spiritual side; I know many people who are almost frightening in their commitment to their favorite album, but no one who equates it to their reason for being.

There is one story that I especially connected to about Neutral Milk Hotel. When they were on what would be their last tour, Jeff Mangum fell to the floor in sobs as he finished a song. The entire band then put down their instruments and piled on top of him in this loving group hug. That was how deeply affected he was by his creation. I am certain it is part of the reason why he left songwriting for good. Is there a toll to be had for expressing the kind of truth contained in that music? Did I find, by accident, a part of the original chunk of soul that God cleaved me off of?

As a Roman Catholic, I am expected to pray the Rosary. When I was still practicing, I would do it Thursdays during Lent, with classmates. If you don’t know, a rosary has five sections of beads, called decades. On each decade, the person praying is supposed to reflect on one of the five Joyful, Luminous, Sorrowful, or Glorious Mysteries of faith. Because of the time of year, I was generally supposed to be reflecting on the sorrowful ones. But, more often than not, I would instead reflect on the fact that these were mysteries. Theologians may have pondered them for hours on end, but at the end of the day, they would throw up their hands and say, “God only knows.” I used to hate it so much, because I saw all the ugly ignorance in religion as coming from that absolute lack of curiosity and questioning. And now as I want to discover what faith is to me, I find myself asking questions as a way to get back. There is
still an anger in my belly for what religion does for me, and there is a reasonable doubt in my soul for the answers it offers. But in times of trouble, I can still get down on my knees and pray and almost feel that connection to God I had as a seven-year-old.

I want to show In the Aeroplane Over the Sea to the women I want because it is a cipher to my entire being, and if they can read it, maybe they have some answer that I’ve always overlooked, or some insight that only I can understand; and maybe, just maybe, they themselves are the answer, and somehow inside them and on their breath and in their soul is God. But as the pragmatism of adulthood settles in my gut, I slowly come to realize that answers don’t come like that, from someone else, and that If I can never find an answer that satisfies me, I am doomed to look for eternity. Now, finally, when I hear Jeff Mangum cry, “God is a place you will wait for the rest of your life,” I realize what that means. It’s a painful, anguished statement about the futility of my quest that will remain painful and anguished forever. But somehow, through some divine insight, I’ve realized that I’ll grow because of this never ending journey, and I’ll discover five new questions with every one I answer about everything, God and His Creation included, and because of this quixotic undertaking I will grow into something befitting the creation He is assumed to have made.

Through Jeff Mangum, I’ve come to realize that an important aspect of faith and love is to leave some questions unanswered. It doesn’t mean to stop looking for those answers, but maybe that the looking is the most important part. I think I can live with that, just like I can live with being alone in the profundity of In the Aeroplane Over the Sea.