

The song begins with a quiet, pulsing, hum. An ambiance as much as a noise, distant and echoing, it feels, vast. It begins to change, at moments becoming more gravely, in others more subdued and dispersed. A guitar begins to play, faintly, a steady strum, the sound growing. As the guitar reaches its peak, two voices join, one breathy, the other light, both masking New Zealand accents with exaggerated David Bowie impressions to varied degrees of success. "Bowies in space... Bowies in spa-a-ace" The lighter voice (Henceforth: **Jermaine**) finding the forefront with the repetition. "Whatcha doin out there man?" Then, Jermaine alone speaks, not sung but with a melody unto itself "**That's pretty freaky Bowie**" The breathy voice (Henceforth: **Bret**) echoes with "**Oooh Bowie.**" The voices go back and forth, still speaking in this melodic way: "**Is it Cold out in space Bowie?**" "**You can borrow my jumper if you like Bowie**" "**Does the cold of deep space make your nipples get pointy Bowie?**" Jermaine asks, inquisitively. "**Do you use your pointy nipples as telescopic antennae to transmit da-ta back to earth??**" "**I bet ya do, you freaky old bastard yo-ou**" the last lines being sung. "**Do you have one really funky sequined space suit, Bowie, or do you have several Cha-Changes?**" "**Do they smoke grass out in space, Bowie, or do they smoke Astro Turf?**" With the conclusion of this line, a ringing begins, accompanied by piano, while the background sound begins to change, the gentle astral white noise becoming more intense, building, as the voices continue "**Receiving transmission, from David Bowie's nipple antennae!**" A new sort of urgency is present in the voice, "**Do you read me Lieutenant Bowie?**" Jermaine continues, sounding more distant and once again singing as he repeats "**I said, do you read me, Lieutenant Bowie-ah?**" The sound continues to build for a moment after he finishes. Then the tension is abruptly released, and the song shifts into its second half.

Sometimes the prettiest songs are the most fucking terrible to play. I was young when the flighty capricious showpieces of Paganini and Wieniawski took hold of me, and I, a fool, thought they were begging to be played by my hands. I loved nothing more than to follow along with the score while listening to a recording, enamored by the skill of the performer, wishing I could be like them. I must have wished a little too much, for I decided to learn how to play Wieniawski's Scherzo-Tarantelle, a seemingly beautiful piece that captivated me with its three-octave arpeggios, artificial harmonics, and double-stop scales. Needless to say, I butchered every one of these little nuances when I, for some stupid reason, performed Scherzo-Tarantelle a few months later at a recital. Not having a piano available, I played along with some awful synthesized keyboard backing track, slowed way down from the correct tempo to a point where I thought I could play halfway decently. I couldn't, of course, but for some reason that thought never seemed to cross my mind. In a performance, you should be able to count your mistakes on one single hand. I would have needed fifty. Can I describe the frustration I felt later when my arrogance was shattered? Can I explain the composition of such a piece, one that should bar all from its performance save those few worthy of it? Can I speak to the need of ensuring that every single performance is flawless, so much so that you break down in tears backstage after making the tiniest mistake?

Is it possible?

Will I ever be able to perform again?

FADE

A friend cries—The chorus
Clear, echoing, lone singer in an empty
chamber.

Our hero's aside
Thoughts alone like a falling tree
Isolation. No acting.

Then—Dark. Hell. Charging. March
A friend is many friends, they're all crying.
Reaching. Screaming. Help! Repeat.

Our hero ingresses. Acting.
Who is he?
Sweat. Sex. Control.
He is a demon. No.
Bravado.
Woe!

And the marching. And the thoughts. And
the crying.

Thoughts burst out!

Anguish!

Confusion!

Anger. Self-pity.

The cries! Too many voices!
(But afraid of silence. Breeds...)

MADNESS

Is he rising? We're off the floor!

Is he rising!? FALLING!?

Is he rising, is he cracking

Into nothing, voices PUSH, PULL

Rise, fade, rise, FADE

Madness. Power. Power? Madness?

Reaching.

Reaching what?

Heaven?

REACHING WHAT?

Nothing.

Then, we're back on the floor.

Where's our hero?

All of Dave Matthews' songs invoke some form of nostalgia. I've heard all of them countless times, or maybe I should say every possible variation of all of his songs, since his band never plays the same song the same way twice. From the starting pitch, the tone of the concert, how loud Dave sings the first note, I can anticipate whether he will play a mellower version or more energized version of the song, which instrument will have a solo, and which lyrics Dave will expect the audience to sing along to. His Fenway Park live album has a permanent place in my car's CD player. One of the songs on the album, *Break Free*, was never officially released until this year, so for years the only way to listen to it was this live version, not a polished studio version. Even now, having access to both, I prefer the live version. For one, the live version is much more energized and features a slightly grating, but intricate solo from the trumpet player Rashawn Ross. And, following the repeated lyrics, "I'll drink your poison if you fill the cup", in minute 2.03, the crowd cheers. Almost as if to say, "Yes, Dave, I'll drink the poison if YOU fill the cup". It is easy to know this song intimately, since the strong residing tone of the bass and drums provide a distinct beat, while Dave's voice and lyrics and Rashawn Ross' trumpet deviate from the beat, they literally break free. Yet, they come back together in every moment I expect and want them to. Just as I start to find the trump solo abrasive, the band joins in for an interlude with no lyrics, predictable beat, and what was the resounding tone during the rest of the song.

Indira Mahaseen - @lagatone

One song that I probably know intimately is the song that I wrote. I was 15 when I had my first nephew, Isaac Raon Hong, and it was a magical experience. I wanted to give him something special, so I decided to make a lullaby.

"Isaac" means laughter in Hebrew, and his Korean name "Raon" means happy or joyful. And Isaac indeed inspired laughter and made me happy. I wanted him to know that he brings pleasure to our family.

The melody was just made up of familiar sounds that that made me feel good and cozy at that time. They were easy to play on the piano. Because I struggled to play the piano and sing simultaneously, I sang an intuitive melody to my brother, and he translated it into notes on the piano.

I was in Korea back then, and Isaac was in the US. I made a voicemail and sent it to my brother, so he could play it to Isaac.

Later, I visited my brother's house and was able to sing the lullaby myself, and by then I had three nephews. It was one of the happiest moments in my life to be able to sing that lullaby to all of them as I was also falling into a sweet, sound slumber with them.

The lyrics (translated from Korean):

When the smiling sun nestles himself between the hills and the night blankets him,
Dear one, may you slip into sound slumber.

I love you, your very being brings me joy.

Every toss and turn, every finger flutter, is a pang in my heart.

I hope in your every tiny footstep laughter blooms.
May you be a blessing of happiness to all.

lovely pretty pretty baby. may you slip into sound slumber.
God will blanket you throughout the tonight.

I haven chosen a blip of a song that I find circulating in my head with bothersome frequency. It sounds different in my heart than any radio recording. I have solidified the lamenting aspects and forgotten the upbeat at coat-check.

My beat that buzzes in and out like a cicada. A perfect slow body rocker. Every syllable is punctuated on the forward motion. The first three beats hold the same note, the forth sets up for a simple ascent but the fifth note comes quickly. Still wanting to rise, the melody fizzles out.

"All my friends are wasted"

To catch up, a quick complaint ascends again in a similar manner. A bit faster, like a person stumbling up four stairs in a dream; only to find that the fifth step lands them on the ground floor.

"And I hate this club"

Reckoning with the weight of such an observation the sound drops. "This club" is not a whine but a tired confession. The dream stairs again.

"And I drank to much"

"Another Friday night I've wasted" Mirrors the hook and I am jamming with the relatability.

Where were these people? Where would they rather be? The Cave? In their rooms watching Prince of Egypt? Sleepy Santa Fe? There are plenty of ways to waste a night.

In the final couplet I am laying on the stairs, maybe there is a koi pond I get to swirl with a dangling hand. And on an internal hum, soothed by something lower to the ground.

mhmh_{my} mhmh_{m_mm}

The year is 1984. And you believe the majority, Bob Dylan is over. Washed up. Has been. His last three albums have been born again christian rock that represents an all time low in his creative prowess and vigor for performance. Bob Dylan hasn't had a major hit since 1976 and *Blood on the Tracks* (which was country anyway, so who cares), and he certainly hasn't been able to rock since 1966 when he released *Blonde on Blonde*. The sixties were a long time ago. Someone along the line Bob Dylan got lost in the sea of history and amphetamines and lost whatever connection to the muses he may have once had. It's the eighties Bob. You've been left behind.

The year is 1984. The Late Night Show is taping at four in the afternoon. A young David Letterman is at his desk, a false night scene behind him. "Ladies and Gentlemen-" he says "-once again, here's Bob Dylan." But the man he throws too on the stage doesn't look like the Bob Dylan you know, the folk singer of *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, or the electric rock star of *Blonde on Blonde*, or perhaps even the traveling, earthy, poet of *Blood on the Tracks*. He wears a black suit and has rolled up the sleeves of the jacket. His tie is loose. On either side are young skinny kids and one has a bandana tied around his head. It doesn't look like a Bob Dylan show, it looks like some punk show. The music starts and you realize that's not where the resemblance ends. This is a punk show.

Bob and the Plugz, his backing band, are a band of coyotes running through the hills overlooking Los Angeles, howling at the moon, There lean and fast and looking to bite anything that moves. Cactus and sagebrush becomes a blur as they speed up, reaching turbineal velocity. They're going so fast that their feet come off the sandy rock and they start running and yipping, running all the way up to the sky. They're singing with the moon now, stardust getting trapped in their fur, getting stuck between their teeth.

The song knocks you down and it doesn't let you get back up. The words of *Jokerman* are a mysterious, powerful and strange. You can't understand them at first, but you can feel them, as Bob conquers up archetype and magic and ancient obscure runes with his poetry. *Distant ships sailing into the mist / born with a snake in both of your fists / hurricane blowin*. Three electric guitars and one drum set makes the song drive and swell. This is serious **rock and roll**, earthy and dirty and rhythmic. The band is standing on a fault line where all the rhythm and the history California is being channelled up, up, up before bursting in an explosion of music and raw sound. And there stands its conductor, cool, collected, and stoic in the face of his own careening powers: ladies and gentlemen, once again, Bob Dylan.

Words and Music

Think of a piece of music that you know intimately, and try to recreate it in words.

'American Pie' by Don McLean is a song that I frequently listened to last semester. This song has many complicated interpretations on the Internet since it involves many stories about Musicians and events, such as Buddy Holly, JFK and Bob Dylan. As a non-American, it's challenging for me to provide a comprehensive account of all the individuals and events intertwined in the song. Instead, I will attempt to offer a personal interpretation based on my own direct emotions. In my mind, I envision a scene of the song

"a paperboy is overcome with sorrow after reading about the passing of his favorite singer in the news. The song that once brought him joy has now lost its enchantment, transforming into a mournful tune. The boy senses that 'the music has died,' and suddenly, he becomes acutely aware of the world's bewildering nature.

He sees new things are emerging but old things are fading away;
He sees some people hold dominion over the world, but others endure suffering.
He sees the familiar levee, but it stands dry.

He does not know what position he shall take in this ever-change world since the new things seem also decent but they are just fundamentally different from the cherished old things he held dear most. He conceives that the world is turning to a new direction that he has not quite grasped yet. The feeling of instability and confusion just suddenly seizes his heart since the old world that he feels familiar with has gone along with the death of his favorite singer."

Everytime I listen to 'American Pie', I feel a specific American-style bewilderment and worry about the world. The 'American way' may be too broad and unclear; to clarify, I am kindly indicating a kind of special spirit that I sense and admire in the fiction 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac. People are heading to a destination on and on, which seems to have a clear goal in front of the road. But nobody in the car knows what will be waiting for them at the destination and in what way they will arrive. The mere thing that people continually feel, in this nomadic journey, is ceaseless change happening around them all the way.

Eels playing the trumpet, reeds shivering to the beat.

Calder Shapes by Matthew Malsall

Every song is a story to me, a collection of images that materialize as soon as the notes reach out to each other. My very own Fantasia, you could say. *Calder Shapes* by Matthew Malsall is a jazz song I associate with calm, water, and a soothing kind of darkness. It begins with the light touch of hollow, bamboo sounds, and "sparkling" like the music of a seashell wind chime, immediately setting off a tone of innocence and serenity. Then the beat begins, grounding the piece: soft drumming and the deep drone of bass strings plucked by the pincers of a crawfish. It balances out the light sparkle of wind combing the reeds, as the sounds begin to stack upon one another. They harmonize in a natural way, sounding good but not constrained by mathematical order. I hear frogs chirping, swishing kelp, reeds clinking against each other.

Then the melody begins. The weeds clear to reveal an eel playing the trumpet in the centre of the lake. The other noises remain but become background to the piece, while the trumpet gently plays in the green light of the water. The eel starts with higher notes, lasso-ing in our attention with innocent, youthful, and energetic energy that sends waves to the banks of the bog. My eyes close, as the trumpet thrills my ears, playing with the drums and the deep base. At moments he speeds up, shaking the kelp, and then slows down again.

Then, two thirds in (at 4:16), the background sounds become slightly muffled, slower, and the eel shifts to a lower, more mature sound. The turquoise, blue, green, and lemon yellow colors are cut by a dark leather-red sound. Smooth velvet notes draw you in.

He scales up to a high note at 5:55, which feels like a kind of revelation, a solution. Like he didn't know he could go up that high. I scrunch my nose and squeeze my eyes shut to listen better, carried through by that high note as he speeds up and slows down between pauses. Each pause serves as inspiration for the next section of the solo.

And then at 6:08, he brings us home. An A4 major held in place for a while. The bog starts come back, a return to reality and a preparation for the silence. He shakes a bottle of sand and the waves bubble up against the soggy bank.

In my last paper, I was curious about how traditionally "non-musical sounds" could appear musical to us. In this piece, the musical instruments played have the opposite effect, reminding me of the sounds of nature. Where do we draw the line between sound and music? What factors go into that differentiation? What is the role of imagination in a musical experience?

Words and Music Week 2 – Intermezzo from 'Carmen'

The lights surrender the stage to the growing darkness of Santa Fe's sky, a natural curtain closing on *Carmen's* second act. The audience applauds, stretches for a few minutes, then settles in eagerly for the rest of the opera. Most know, or have guessed, how this story ends – it's no secret that Carmen's fate will be a tragic one, not to her and not to us – yet we all await it with something like eagerness.

Silence settles over us, and out of that silence a harp begins to play, notes rolling up and down, as if in inhale and exhale. The flute joins a moment later, floating over and between the hills of the harp's music, singing of sleep and ease, if just for a moment. On a collective breath several others join in – the cello hums beneath the winds, violin and viola join the harp with their delicate pizzicato, and the oboe entangles in duet with the flute. I remember running my fingers across my viola's strings in that pizzicato, and my mind and body align with the music now as they did then, back and forth, up and down, in and out. Flute slips beneath the oboe for a second, then rejoins the duet as the orchestra brings the melody to its climax. At last, every thread of the tapestry is woven together, and the full potential of the music is realized. The conductor beckons the violin from the center of the music to the surface for a few sweeping measures. Musicians, conductor, and audience share in this moment, all a little breathless, as if taking in the view from a mountaintop. Too soon it's time to come back down, the actors have taken their places on the stage and the story is ready to reach its conclusion. A final exhale in the winds, a final pluck on string and harp, and the night belongs once more to Carmen and Don Jose.

Think of the piece of music that you know intimately, and try to recreate it in words.

One piece of music that brings me lots of feelings is the song *God's Country* by U2. I remember listening to this song in the car when I was young and staring out of the window, lost in my imagination. This song reminds me not only of my childhood, but of roads that never seem to end and open spaces that go on for miles. If I had to recreate the song using words, I would first state it as freedom, and then maybe a landscape, like the desert. But there's something about those two things that encapture the same emotion. The way the electric guitar cries is almost human-like, or like a windy wailing sound you might hear in remote places. The song strikes a chord of longing within me; but a longing I can't seem to identify or name. Is it for the past or is it for the future? Maybe it's for everything at once, just as the music is somehow timeless and not affected by the passage of time as we are. The song evokes a sense of movement without a destination, and a car traveling down a straight road. Like the sense of freedom one gets from driving with the windows down - strange as we sit in a confined metal box and yet feel free. Similar to listening to a stationary song and yet through it escaping the world.

From thousands of songs by Tagore, it is difficult for me to choose one. However, there is one song that makes me wonder about life more than any other composition by any other composers. It is not just a song for me but a realization about the reality of life. I am saying it is the reality of life because I feel like I am slowly getting to know real life. I was in a delusion previously but now I am getting closer to life where I question everything, getting confused, making mistakes, and learning. Sometimes life seems meaningless. I don't want to do the things that I do every day. I am afraid of the future. I need light to clear out my path. In this song, *ghate boshe achi anmona, jeteche bohia shushomoy* Tagore asks for god's help when he is lost in life and says he will not follow the path that does not take him to god. The English translation¹ of the first few lines of this song is

Indifferent, I sit at the landing, the auspicious moment passes.
Float not the boat in the breeze that blows not towards you.
The day ends, friends, the day ends and the gem of the day sets –
Dark night spreads all over and hundreds of fears encircle.

I find this song relatable every day because this song captures my fear and concerns about life. Every day hundreds of fears circle around me but still, life is going on. Waiting for the ultimate guide to show me the right way. In the later part of the song, Tagore is waiting for death. He is indicating that death is peaceful and freedom from all the toils of life. I don't know how I think about death but it makes me wonder about death and how it connects to life.

Besides this philosophical aspect and the darkness of this song, there is something about the melody of this song that is comforting. It brings peace. Thinking about hardship and death becomes comforting suddenly. It makes me want to believe in some higher power and I want to leave all my concerns behind and dive deep into the music and contemplate. This composition of Tagore has become a part of my philosophy of life.

¹ Collected from <https://www.geetabitan.com/lyrics/rs-g/ghate-boshe-achhi-english-translation.html>.

Describing a song

Picture, if you will, a tiny blackbox theatre. The seats are filled to see the performer for the night, and the crowd murmurs in anticipation. You do not have a seat, but are standing by the door, in the shadows, because your dad knew some people who got you in. Before the main show, there is an opening artist, someone no one in that theatre, or much of anywhere, has ever heard of. The lights dim. A spotlight shines on a young man and his guitar, and the first few notes twang out of it, already so incredibly emotional. The young man's voice starts, and the theatre is dead silent, captivated by the sorrow and desperate passion pouring out of this young man. The song is not his, some in the theatre know it, but it might as well be, the way he has made his soul raw and vulnerable. The way he makes the guitar sing in the rises and falls of the melody. The way his voice wavers as if he is about to cry. Maybe he is.

In this scenario, you are my mom at the Velvet Elvis in Seattle, Washington, early 1994. The singer Jeff Buckley.

This is the image I always think of whenever I hear this song. I always cry, mostly while laying on the floor of my room. It feels simultaneously like being held and being abandoned, like a final embrace before parting forever. Like being so angry and frustrated at the world, but being too sad and overwhelmed to do anything about it. It feels like coming home to find everyone has already abandoned it. Like a ghost town grown over with vines. There is life there, yes, but not the kind you were looking for. Not the right kind of comfort.