

stop. go now



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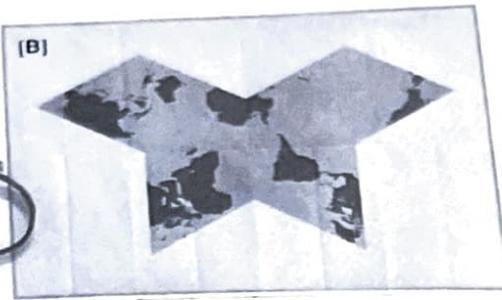
WITCHES,
ANGELS,
AND THIEVES:

I'M THINKING
OF SAMPLING
THINGS

101

We are
past in
folders
we sc
memo
recall

[A]



[C]



[D]



[E]



We are all archivists now, managing personal data and storing past lives in clouds. Decades condense into a cascade of folders all accessible in a click. Disk almost full. Overflowing, we scroll through feeds and histories and screenshot new memories, egos inflamed and eyes dulled by blue light. We recall the magic of life and report its spells.



[G]

[F]

In my room, offline, strata is interwoven, intertextual, and entangled. A lavender 3D printed bananafoot swings on floss and zines burst with paintings, farm animals, and marginalia scribbled on scans of wildflowers. On the opposite wall, a fluorescent gnomonic butterfly projection of earth orients space. Below, a graphite drawing of the New Mexico landscape and a bricolage sculpture that refracts the scene in many directions. A remixed postcard announces: "The weather is here... Wish you were beautiful!"

Ink in books, pixels on screens, filament from printers, together in cataclysm and abundance. Like everyone, I would like to make sense of what is happening and what has piled up. While walking, I often make voice recordings and find the rhythm in my steps, reporting locations and events like a forward observer and discovering what exists between the dots.

Sonic cliff notes can float free of what snags writing. Sounds drip together and get cooked in compressed friction. Like food or drink, sounds can intoxicate, generatively hypnotize, allowing something new to happen. So I leave messages

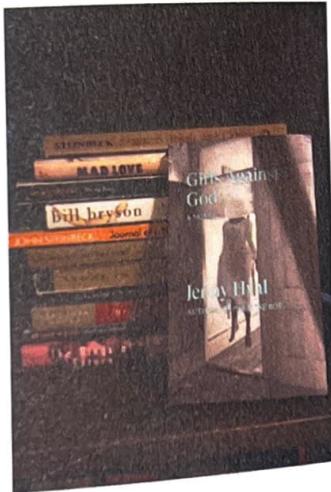
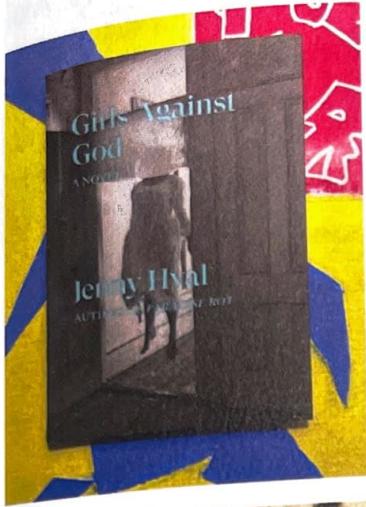
for a future version of myself to rock along to and keep it going. Chefs send home recipes in a to-go bag. Witches leave diagrams for the next traveler charting the stars.

On March 1, 2020, walking home from a concert in Brooklyn, I noted I had been “thinking about all of these threads and how everything in my life is connected because I am the needle.” [1]

In October 2020, many months into a quarantine life with a much different thread count, I began reading Marjam Idriss’ English translation of Jenny Hval’s daring and generous occult travelogue, *Girls Against God*. The novel opens with the seething speech of a young woman who hates god and hates the Norwegian word for god. She hates Norwegian too, “a language fit for people who don’t really understand language, who don’t understand poetry or the need to communicate.” [2] The narrator-protagonist meets like-minded friends and together they form a band who perform rituals instead of playing gigs, communing across time and space. Like in Baudrillard’s fried dissertation on telematic and metastatic interchanges, [3] Hval’s narrators tap into the cosmic internet that hums when she and her friends “water the tomato plants near the modem.” [4] Brimming with punk-surrealist romps, drawings, and manifestos, the novel alchemizes Hval’s roles as archivist, art historian, critic, musician, and writer.

Here and in her first novel, *Paradise Rot*, Hval shuttles between wild shaman and deadpan clinician, probing how successive experiences are saved in our bodies and on hard drives. [5] *Girls Against God* concludes with the screenplay of an imagined film, the narrativization skipping beyond cliffs of possibility and visuality. References to moving images abound, and in an interview Hval mused that “film scripts have a connection to magic, because it is the spell you then have to perform.” [6] Earlier in the book, the narrator (Hval?) lectures on her favorite movies, rejecting the film class wisdom that “Citizen Kane is the best film in the world, followed by everything that Tarkovsky and Bergman made.” [7] Regurgitating and rewriting the canon is an omnivorous and messy feast in which Hval composes a sort of anti-Michelin guide for the contemporary traveler/consumer. [8] *Girls Against God* flips many scripts

and tears others up, imagining what it would be like to be saved “from the position of a contemporary subject passively accepting the narratives offered it by past art, past stories about gender, expression, and hierarchy.” [9]



[H]

This redemptive thinking takes up Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno’s belief that “the past can be transformed, [and] that injustice can be corrected” by looking back on past sufferings and remembering them truthfully. [10] For Benjamin, the artist Paul Klee’s monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920) represented the “angel of history” who sees what we call progress as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” at his feet. [11] Supposedly thrust into the future by storms, the angel always faces the past, caught in an apocalyptic hurricane of trauma and time.

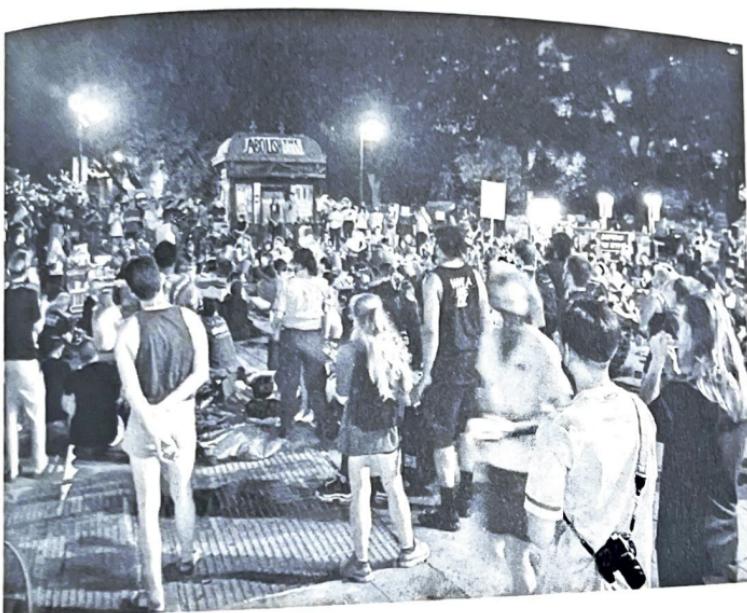
This does not need to be an act of destruction or violence. Artists can utilize archives as a form of advocacy to reorient towards rehabilitation and an expanded kinship across all species and matter.

In the speculative documentary film *The Last Angel of History*, a “data thief” from the future travels backward through time, unearthing “technofossils” and assembling the fragments into a code by which he can have the “keys to the future.”^[12] His search focuses on Afrofuturists who, like science fiction writers, imagined futures and distorted the present. Lee Perry, Sun Ra, George Clinton and others knew that as Black folks in America, they shared subjectivities with sci-fi protagonists who are often estranged from and at odds with power. And so they developed far-out mythologies to explain who they were as living humans. In the 1974 film *Space is the Place*, Ra addresses “Earthlings” who “only want to speak of realities... no myths” and then breaks the illusion: “I’m the myth talking to you,” says Ra with a grin.^[13]

Hval is also interested in studying the moments before and after everything blows up. *Girls Against God* retells the history of nuclear weapons development in terms of gender and sexual politics and Biblical mores. The Trinity test in 1945 detonated by atomic fission, thus adhering to God’s framework dividing Eve from Adam and maintaining masculine purity. But Operation Ivy and the thermonuclear fusion tests in the

1950s were uncontrollable and too-dangerous experiments in queerness and feminism... a both/and too unsettling and abandoned. [14]

It is most powerful when fact and fiction do not split but join. We see something and then take out our camera to shoot it, but the line between real and representation, archival trace or primal truth vanishes. This does not need to be an act of destruction or violence. Artists can utilize archives as a form of advocacy to reorient towards rehabilitation and an expanded kinship across all species and matter.

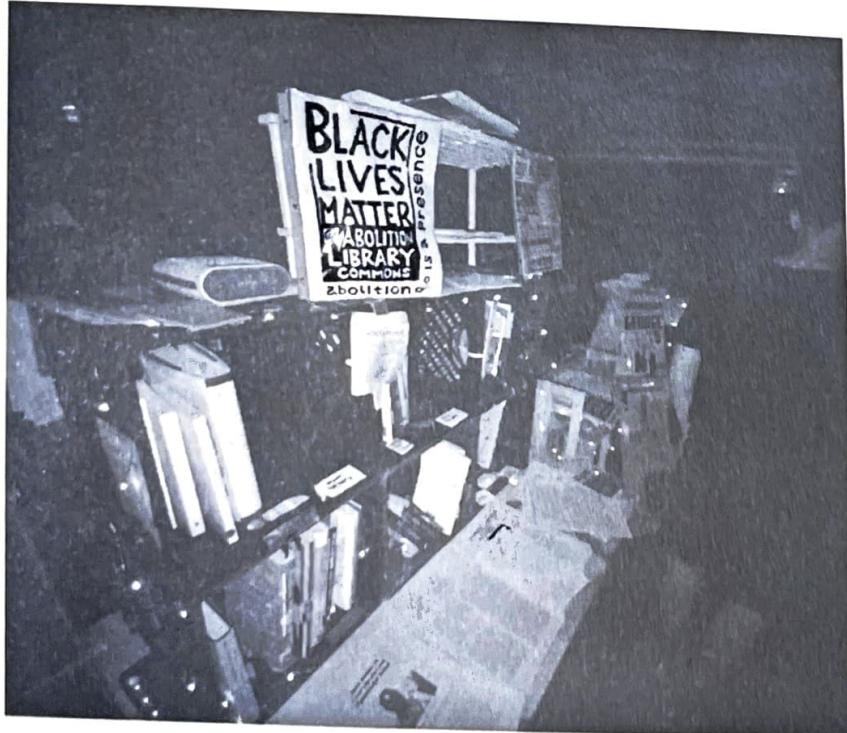


[1]

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd, renewing rallying cries and global movements against white supremacist state violence. Black Lives Matter. By June, the plaza outside of City Hall Park in Manhattan had become an encampment of hundreds of protestors demanding the NYPD's budget be defunded by at least \$1 billion. I spent about a week there, learning, listening, witnessing, holding the lines, eating, meeting people, and reading. There was free food and clothing, art supplies, support groups, medicine, song, and yoga every morning. On June 25, employees of the publisher Verso brought a truckload full of queer, Marxist, Black, and other radical texts to be given out to activists.

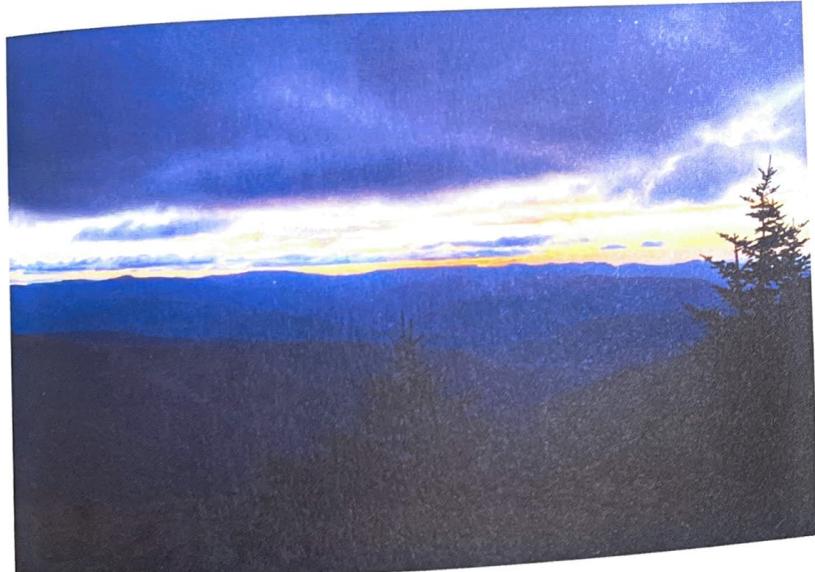
Within days, the plywood board full of books grew to become a full-fledged Abolition Library Commons. I chose to read Michele Wallace's *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*. Having studied the artworks of Wallace's mother, Faith Ringgold, I knew that Wallace's reflections would be rich and potent. I read about Harlem, Black modernisms, and the "great American whitewash" of 1968, where it became clear that "leaving the black subject out always seems to coincide with a preference for global or synthetic or structural views." [15]

Soon after July 4, 2020, in the heat of the summer, it became clear that the beautiful metastasizing occupying organism had begun to die. Bickering, sleep deprivation, and actions by the New York City Council, who passed a budget not even close to meeting the \$1b reduction. Within days of the vote, the NYPD squashed the protests with impunity and power-washed everything, destroying any evidence of disruption. Still, we can tell many stories from this time. The occupation was a great demonstration of the (de)composition cycles of protest, anarchism, and archive-building. With the legacy of Black bodies being executed in American streets still ongoing, and the imagined corpus of settler-colonial white supremacy rattling with death or anxiety, the protests propagated like rhizomatic offshoots which heralded truths about the future of community and security.



[J]

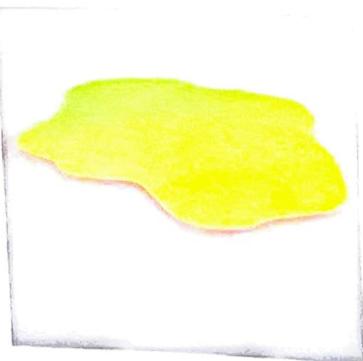
Alongside energized activists, New Yorkers – unhoused and in need – found comfort and resources at the occupation, and used their bodies to show the mayor’s office and city council that things need to change. For the scholar Donna Haraway, ecological and political crises boil down to a crisis of refuge: a growing number of refugees (plant, animal, human, beyond) and a shrinking availability for refuge. Rather than believe we are living in a new epoch or geologic age marred by anthropogenic climate change, Haraway suggests we are in a transitional band of time. She encourages us to imagine, build, and usher in the next age where parks will not be locked and riot police will not overturn tables full of books by Octavia Butler and Ursule Le Guin. Haraway calls for building “webs of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, science fact”^[16] and proposes we join forces to reconstitute refuges.



[K]

Imagining crisis and refuge, excavating, documenting, and fabricating, is central to the work of Johann Diedrick, who digs at intersections of art, science, and ritual. His sonic performance *Prelude to Wake* is an archaeological inquiry that imagines soundscapes on a geologic but also personal scale, situating listeners within ongoing crises. Alongside performance-based work, Diedrick is also a software engineer and instrument designer. Recently, he developed Dark Matters, an “interactive web experience that spotlights the absence of Black speech in

the underlying datasets used to train voice interface systems in products like Alexa, Google Home, [and] Siri.”^[17] This engagement in redemptive time travel points to omissions in the past that change what we hear from our computers in the present. When it comes to history, Diedrick’s work asks who is doing the looking (or listening), and offers a hand to overcome paralysis.



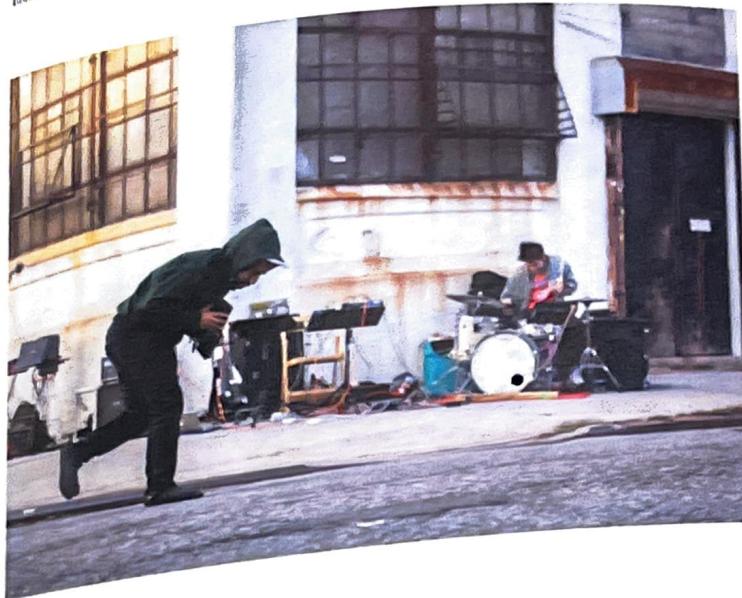
[M]

[L]

Matt Evans’ music also gets me moving, rooted in cybernetic ecologies and collaboratively humming or drumming with natural frequencies. In March 2020, he released his debut solo album *New Topographics*, premiering an abstract, wordless aquarium of cephalopodic jammers that wiggled and ran along with frenetic percussion. The chat window on the Twitch livestream buzzed with excitement. At a November 2020 live performance outside of Cooler Gallery in Brooklyn, Evans played from the album and wired microphones to a tree, allowing a gentle, hopeful interspecies sonic-tactile kinship.

Evans and Diedrick also play with each other, and are important practitioners who talk with trees, share indigenous wisdom, and listen to polluted waterways. Their musics are not songs as much as ecological worlds that syncretize the organic

and inorganic into vibrant, reflexive energy. Indoors or out, on cassette, streaming audio, or video, these performances are like flint and steel, playable over and over again always with a spark.



[N]

In 2020, quarantined in my room in Brooklyn, I most often listened to music by Evans and Diedrick in addition to Jenny Hval, Sylvan Esso, Katie Dey, Life Without Buildings, and Adrianne Lenker. Each of these musicians delve deeply to produce sonic harvests. Sylvan Esso and Katie Dey are contemporary queer electronic projects that find humanity in the machine and vice versa, while Life Without Buildings was a shortlived art rock band whose lead singer, Sue Tompkins, spoke and sang delightfully strange lyrics pulled from books, magazines, and journals.

Adrianne Lenker is the powerhouse guitarist, singer-songwriter, and bandleader who has likened her process of “[archiving] songs in their original forms” to shedding skin.^[18] With a solo album in 2018, two albums with her band Big Thief in 2019, and two solo albums in 2020, she is one of the most vulnerable and prolific artists of our time. Unfussed with many production flourishes, both of her 2020 albums, songs and instrumentals, were recorded to tape in an analog process that infused granular shimmer and the sounds of birds and wind chimes with the music.

The opening of “zombie girl,” from songs, puts the listener in a very specific space: “What a dream that was / I almost couldn’t wake because / I was frozen in bed with a zombie girl / Vacant as a closed down fair.” [19] As is characteristic of her music, Lenker plays with names and pronouns, exchanging “I” for “you” and singing about how music is used to cover questions about emptiness. Instead of answering a question, Lenker closes the song by repeatedly asking one: “What’s on your mind?” [20]

Threading the needle is still on my mind. On October 9, 2019, Big Thief performed the first of three consecutive sold out shows in New York City. As the first song of an encore, Lenker announced the band was going to play an outlier that had not found its way onto either record released that year or any before or since. After some whistles and cheers from the crowd, Lenker’s electric guitar rolled out a slow trot and James Krivchenia’s percussion set into the bracing but drowsy flow of a lullaby. Bassist Max Oleartchik and guitarist Buck Meek rocked with low, steady grooves as Lenker sang:

*Wrapped in the wings of a sparrow
Beak is as sharp as an arrow
Sings in the whispering whistle
Sleeps in the ivy and thistle*

*Owls out swooping and howling
Deep in the midnight prowling
“Mama” the scream of the eagle
Threading my heart through the needle
Threading the blood though the apple
Sucking the juice from the apple*

At this point, Lenker sings the word “trapped” and then repeats it, laughing and faltering as the word comes out of her mouth at the wrong time. I watch this performance over and over again on YouTube. [21] Like the angel of history whose wings are trapped open by the wind, the song is about being wrapped up in mighty natural forces, but rather than the strong masculine grip and gaze imagined by Benjamin, Lenker focuses on protection under the grace of mother nature and the animals and plants we share the Earth with.



© BROOKLYN STEEL
Big Thief "Sparrow"

[0]

In Lenker's hands, the guitar is not a phallic weapon nor is it thrown around like a toy. Instead, the music becomes a needle that mends and binds together. Performed live, this song intervenes upon what is considered fixed in the past. The animistic lines continue about consumption, reproduction, and incorporating genetic archives into our bodies – “Eating the seeds of the apple / Bearing the tree from the apple” – before unfurling into a stirring revision of the story of Adam and Eve.

*Nakedly running I saw her
Boy chasing after to stall her
I wish I'd have spoken to call her
Before she found fabric to shawl her*

*Breasts bound and burdened with fiber
Adam came trembling beside her, and he said:*

*“She has the poison inside her”
“She talks to snakes and they guide her”*

Unreleased and perhaps unfinished, this Big Thief song is another key to understanding how stories are told, who tells

them, and what they mean. Lenker sings what she knows to be true with confidence and aching honesty. There is a recurring idea in *Girls Against God* that magic leaves no proof of its existence and escapes most attempts to be archived or remembered. This is one reason that art and artists are so important, because artworks are the evidentiary residue left over from a magical, transformative event. Amid a glut of content for content's sake that reinforces toxic conditions, there is still art to be made and experienced that hacks and (re) presents what has been and what can be.

We are archivists because we thread the needle. We are the needle and we thread ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 Voice memo, March 1, 2020.
- 2 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (Verso, 2020), 7.
- 3 "When I pick up my telephone the marginal network hooks me up and keeps harping at me with the unbearable good will of that which seeks and claims to communicate. Deregulated radio speaks, sings, expresses itself." Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Semiotext(e), 1988, translated by Bernard & Caroline Schutze, edited by Sylvère Lotringer).
- 4 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (Verso, 2020), 149.
- 5 Hval's first novel was published in Norwegian as *Perlebryggeriet* (2009) and she rewrote the book in English as *Paradise Rot* (2018). *Girls Against God* was initially published in Norwegian as *Å hate Gud* (2018).
- 6 Alexandra Kleeman, "Jenny Hval and Alexandra Kleeman Talk Magic Words, With Melodies, and Norwegian Black Metal Scene," Literary Hub, October 30, 2020.
- 7 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (Verso, 2020), 18.
- 8 The three films praised most in the novel are *Daisies* (1966), *Penda's Fen* (1974), and *Jubilee* (1978).
- 9 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (Verso, 2020), 41.
- 10 Stuart Jeffries, "The Storm Blowing from Paradise: Walter Benjamin and Klee's Angelus Novus," Verso, August 2, 2016, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2791-the-storm-blowing-from-paradise-walter-benjamin-and-klee-s-angelus-novus> and David Kleinberg-Levin, e-mail message to author, January 24, 2021.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (First Mariner Books, 2019), 201.
- 12 *The Last Angel of History* by John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective, 1995, film.
- 13 *Space is the Place* by John Coney, Joshua Smith, and Sun Ra, 1974, film.
- 14 Jenny Hval, *Girls Against God* (Verso, 2020), 164-165.
- 15 Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (Verso, 2016, first published in 1988).
- 16 Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6, no. 1 (2015): 159-165.
- 17 @johannndiedrick Instagram caption, January 12, 2021.
- 18 Lizzie Manno, "Adrienne Lenker: abysskiss Review," Paste, October 5, 2018, [https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/adrienne-lenker/abysskiss-review/](https://www.pastemagazine.com/music/adrienne-lenker/adrienne-lenker-abysskiss-review/).
- 19 Adrienne Lenker, "zombie girl," songs, (4AD, 2020).
- 20 Adrienne Lenker, "zombie girl," songs, (4AD, 2020).
- 21 Riley Fields, "Big Thief 'Sparrow,'" YouTube, October 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4kSU5sKJwo>.