

AUDIO COMPANIONSHIP

Please enjoy this mixtape of music assembled with these poems in mind.

SMALL CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

By Nick Anderson

*A hymnal of lonely choruses
immediately recognizable to
those who have wandered*



Yellow Bench Polarity

A yellow city bench stretched a mile long holds two laughing occupants, and
my attention.

The smoke from your shared cigarette maneuvers its way around your loud,
awkward jokes and I am instantly envious.

You are not the sad, strutting people that fill these mirrored spaces,
light from each storefront window a spotlight
for each lonely person
who wants
just once
for someone to look them in the eyes

That's all I want at least,
but all the eyes I see
repel me like similar magnets
spurn the possibilities of contented contact

But you two,
it seems you don't even notice you're looking into them
That's such a privilege, I just want you to know
To find eyes of an opposite polarity
in this crowded, magnetic world.

I'm not lonely, in the usual sense. I have plenty of friends and all that. But the whole love thing, that's just always been beyond me. When I see a couple sitting there smoking a cigarette like that, it really gets me going.

I like to walk around a lot, just through the streets where I live and all. In the city there's a lot of interesting places to wind up on accident. I'm not really the kind to go someplace, a lot of times if I think a place is interesting I'll just walk by it and look in. This isn't some form of self pity or anything, I've just always thought most things were more interesting to watch than to actually participate in. I like to watch people try and fit in the tiny parking spots in front of my building, or guess where they're going based on what kind of clothes their wearing. I guess that's kind of weird for a guy my age. I also like to drink a lot and then ride my bike through parks at night, but that's more or less a different problem entirely. I guess I just never found the things I'm supposed to be interested in. Except for love or course. But sometimes you can just ignore that.



Instruments

It is 2 o'clock, Sunday morning, and I am awake because your bed frame is too close to my wall. A steady pelvis a foot away pounds out a practically danceable rhythm, my angry knocks do nothing but create a two tone shuffle, that like every Operation Ivy song holds the pluralism of unity and loneliness. You sing like a clarinet.

Two-person-love-making-music-machine, why must you play this song? I don't want to hear its tired chorus, its predictable verses of someone-else-in-my-arms. Was it not enough that your early morning move-in made so much noise, with its crescendo of hearty laughter and furniture scraping against walls? Was it not sufficient that your housewarming party pulsated into the easy quiet of my evening meal? That now you must continue to drive the unending refrain of the other people that fill your life, these instruments that only the lonely can hear?

My fan blades are not the symphony they used to be. Four seasons, four rushed movements, sometimes I feel they weren't enough, even though they measured out perfectly, in the transient youthful dance of 4/4 time. When they ended I could hear snowfall again and I loved it, I worshiped it. I never noticed the sunken bass cleft you left on your side of the bed, the stains of eighth notes on your pillowcase, let's face it, the music had stopped being pretty a long time ago. The verses dropped, we couldn't make up words fast enough for the meter we had set. And you, in the next room, can't you hear the same thing? Can't you hear the musician's arm becoming tired, his rhythm loosening? A song that beautiful cannot be played forever.

Your concert hall is hushed now, except for muted whispers, the final duet of the night. The mattress springs have turned from fiddle to violin. I know this movement - the soft pull of two tired bodies into a close, contented sleep. I've played this one before. My hands remember the motions, as I embrace a pillow in your stead. Music forms its own kind of memory, doesn't it? I forgot how much I like this one. Ok, you can play this one. Last one, please. I've had an awful lot to think about, all these melodies reversing the lullaby I sing to myself each night. But thank you. I needed to hear them again. Short, yes; futile, yes . . . but beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

When sleep gets hard, even the smallest noise disturbs you, you know? I have a sound machine I use sometimes, but I'm kind of embarrassed by the thought of it, so sometimes I hide it. I don't know why, no one else ever sees the inside of my room. Its quite disheveled anyway, there's cardboard blocking out the sunlight, because all I really use it for is sleeping and getting dressed. My friend Shaun thinks it makes me look pathetic. "What girl is ever going to want to stay the night in there?" he asks me. I guess I never really considered that. He thinks its funny I'm never with girls. He calls it my "condition", like I've got leukemia or something. Every time I tell him I met someone interesting he says something like "Way to help your condition." I really resent it. Shaun has this face that when he turns it sideways, I swear it could be on a Greek coin. He's got this really nice pretty girl that's going to marry him. That's the thing about attractive people, they think its really easy to meet people.

I'm not ugly or anything, you know, just not the type that turns heads. I've had my chances. Faces still appear to me in random flashbacks when alcohol leads me to yearbooks and double prints from vacation disposable cameras. I think about them when I try to fall asleep.

CONTACT LENSES

MARBLE &

BUTTERFLIES

Contact Lenses, Marbles, and Butterfiles

Do you remember the dance you asked me to?
We were innocence incarnate
unscathed by the youthful expectations of love,
we wore costumes instead of gowns and ties
a mockery of the whole dumb concept
“We’re not taking this seriously,” see,
“we’re not looking our best,
because what do we have to prove,
who do we have to impress?”
We danced like idiots
to all the wrong songs
and soaked in the stares
as disco lights painted the gym floor

we held hands
we even
well
We danced slow this once
My arms tightened a crescent around your waist,
your arms crossed behind my neck,
and for a second we were doing something better than dancing
or maybe dancing for the first time
Relaxed, our bodies swaying
no longer restrained by schoolyard notions
of what it meant to hold somebody

When the music faded we released
and just like that, whatever magic we had created
that had been pressed between our bellies
dropped to floor and scattered like
a billion contact lenses, marbles and butterflies
and each day during P.E.
I searched every corner, waved a sock in every rafter
but I never found a piece of it again.

Now every night before sleep, when the forms soften in my mind
I hear heartbeats synched to bad 90's R&B
I see rainbow colored dots swirl across the walls
and smell your perfumed hair
Because I've held a thousand hands since then
taken more than my share of lovers
chased down every carnal pleasure
but not one holds a candle to the way I felt
when our hands cupped
and your head touched my chest for the first time.

...

I tried to find it again, in your tired eyes
one week past, 8 years late.

When you leapt from the car door Gabriel played jazz -
the weight of you on my neck again
As your lips parted they played an arresting melody
like a music box I hadn't opened since the world was simple and small.
The whole day was painted blue grey to match your eyes,
a watercolor bleeding into your soft, desaturated hair
Your features used to be brighter, I know -
your colors have faded since you breathed out that holy ghost
that was wrapped around your heart.
It seems that in the space left it started to beat a little
and the thump you felt in your thumb found my phone number
across the keypad of your phone

This was the moment I waited for,
though I knew it would never happen the way I saw it in
those myriad half-dreams I self-medicate with
The holy ghost is a sleepy guard
and the realities that snuck in
ripped the saran wrap off your dreams
and before you knew it, you were an adult like me
and we never found those
contact lenses, marbles, and butterflies,
but god dammit if we didn't try
some things we just have to let go
and when your hand danced a goodbye
I breathed out the last of my goodness too
And I blew it out towards you

Could you smell it on the air?
That one was for you.

When I wake up in the morning, a lot of times I feel pretty good until reality catches up with me. There's that one glorious moment when you first wake up, when you don't know anything, but then you stretch and it all comes back to you. The things you thought of while you were falling asleep turn over beside you and the whole ugly affair smiles expectantly like you're about to offer to make breakfast. That's the first thing I've got to shake in the morning. I like to hand those thoughts its coat and hurry it out the door so I can get on with my day, forget about it until the night comes again.

But sometimes you just can't. I wander over to my computer, and I pretend like I don't know what I'm looking for but of course I do and I find it. The videos, they're public for chrissake. I don't know how I got there, but she looked just like her. Not her, the adult, the one with the dried up dreams and all that. Her, the fifteen year old that still held the whole world in her clasped hands. That's what I was thinking of.



Unsure Hips

Who are you dancing for?
It is not me, three inches away
Pumping emotions and memories into the screen
Skinning them and hanging them before my closed eyes
In an attempt to feel you

It is not for me that you dance, so young and bare
Twirling and giggling in a blur of pink and lime green

Do you feel dirty?
Because I do
Do you feel satisfied?
Because I don't

You are not hard to find
Most popular, most viewed
You fill my screen in droves, removing clothing
Down to satin billows of Brynhildr's flames
Always the same moves
The same songs
The same endings

What you would forbid in person
Is eating you out in public privacy

If only I could tell you that this is not love
That this is not even attention
That this is only fallacy, substitution, pretend
You would not hear

Words and voices, muted
while "Barbie Girl" blares
Bubble gum lies and anonymous stars
that's all that we can hear.

Small thing with the unsure hips,
you are trading something you'll never get back
for something you'll never receive.

Exactly what we want,
what we don't need

Some things you know while you're doing them, you're just going to feel awful after its all finished. It doesn't exactly make you feel like a gentlemen. I guess it means you're really not one. She made the video, it was public for chrissake. I know, no excuse, but still. After something like that I have to go lay in my dark room for a while, the light forcing its way through the crooked-cut cardboard in pieces. I feel like there's light poking through me in places too, but things like this just keep it covered up. I'm not a sad person, or really a bad person, but I certainly have my moments. I decide maybe its time I try to meet someone, you know. I was thinking that maybe if I could connect with someone, like really connect with them, I wouldn't be stuck in these old memories all the time. There really are people all over the place. I guess I could be meeting people all the time.

An Ope
Letter to
Red-Hair
Girl with

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Eyes

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An Open Letter to the Red-Haired Girl with Neon Frisbee Eyes

Red haired girl i stood next to on the elevator today:

As we entered and I,
finding my place,
turned around

And
You
walking one step towards me, then two,
looked up (This was my favorite part):

Two cerulean discs
the circular smear on the pallet of a hesitant artist
The hue was too bright, too pure to match
the painting they were being applied to.

When you blinked
The whole cab went dark

And on the ride up
they painted the walls with blue oil pastel
as you looked at posters, lighted numbers
and sometimes me

Red haired girl, with the neon frisbee eyes;
I am sorry i stared
I was just looking for a way to say,
“Your eyes remind me of an anime android
That has learned how to love”
Or,
“The pointillism of their small freckles
would bring Seurat to tears”

But the elevator, filled with the non-glowing,
suffocated the words
and its not like I’ve ever known just what to say

Still I want to ask
if behind your retinas
you have LED, or a traditional bulb?
Must they be charged regularly,
to maintain luminance?
Do jewel thieves ever make attempts on them?
Do they bother people during a movie?
Do you ever wish you could shut the off,
So that people would stop staring,
So that you could know darkness
inside your own eyelids?

It seems a reasonable request.

And i won't even go into the hair,
The red sea, merging two continents in it's magnificence

It doesn't matter,
this is your floor
They flash one more time at me
leaving crazy blue streaks
like long-exposure night photography
And like a camera flash,
I see them again when i look at white walls
Blue, red, yellow, green

Gone

Girls. I've never known exactly what to say, even if I find one really pretty and I know all that can come out of my mouth is good things. It's just really easy to appear creepy, especially when you're saying nice things. Pretty girls, they've always got someone saying this or that to them. Its really a hard business getting in with them.

I was talking about girls with my friend Jake one night. He's a really simple guy – I don't mean that like he's stupid or something, more like he just doesn't have any furniture. His place is pretty small but still, all he's got is this card table that we sit and drink at. "I like 'em all American," he said, "Blonde, blue eyes, big boobs." I tell him that's nice, that I'm not exactly sure what it is I'm about. "I just know it when I meet her." I said. Jake's divorced, he's not quite thirty. I have to think something like that'll mess with you. I think that's the reason he doesn't have any furniture. Not because his ex-wife's got all his money, that's not the case. I just think, that after having love like that, especially so young, it's probably easy to get disillusioned. I mean, if love's not perfect, what is? Why even bother with anything else, if the best aspect of life isn't even that great? That's the line of thinking I think, at least in my opinion. You'd have to ask Jake, we didn't really get into it. I feel like him sometimes though, even though I've never been married. What if all this hope I'm carrying is just going to go to waste?

What if "not exactly depressed" is the best I'm going to get?

**SMALL
CONCENTRIC
CIRCLES**

Small, Concentric Circles

I tried to find you in coffee shops and libraries, but the bookshelves hollered “Creep!”, the lattes giggled up bubbles.

I tapped the shoulder of possibility but each time it looked at me with unfamiliar eyes, so I apologized for mistaking it for someone else.

I walked darkened streets in the feeling-small summers past, before I realized this city plays the same three chords over and over again. Now I look in lit windows and wonder how there could be so many lamps in this neighborhood but so few people.

There’s no people out here. I oversell the possibility, sure, but it is so outlandish a thought? That someone out there might want to return the thoughts I throw into air like a renegade satellite?

Some form of sympathy I guess, my friend drags me to a dark dance bar where I drink until hip hop makes sense, assault the dance floor like a thirsty hyena and grab hips and give winks to a blurry mass of curled brunette hair and eyelashes. The patrons move in small, concentric circles away from me. Seems you can’t wear nice guy like you can wear trustfund pseudo-thug. A middle-aged man in a college basketball jersey humps a high school girl and I tell my friend that some things have never hit me like this before -

You pretentious makeup-caked hussies with the short seams and your gawky-loud voices, you rattle off an endless loop of shit-coated cliches to a deaf audience who feigns interest so they can grab your breasts. And tonight I stand at the front of the line because just once I want to play along and pretend like this means something real to me. If this is a test of masculinity you picked the right night! Someone hand out the scantrons, I want to take a shot. Will you use a curve to compensate for the alcohol intake of me and my peers? WHERE THE FUCK IS MY DESK? I am tripping over bar stools and my friend helps me to a large wooden door as I yell “Pencils Down!”

I will admit that not every action in my life has been accurate or brilliant, but this one stings like the first time I fell off a bike while my friends were watching. You want to stand up and insist that this rarely happens but you

can't hide the fact that you're just a kid and you're still learning this thing that everyone else has got down pat.

Well, I'll tell you this much.

This entrance exam we've made of love, I won't have it. The library never has the study guide, the waiting list is filled with a thousand old men who will never marry. They sit awkwardly in the entryway, every afternoon since puberty, reading the spines of books people drop in the return slot. The librarian smiles at me like she knows what I'm thinking but she hasn't got a clue. What's in there for me anyway? Is there a detailed explanation of why I can't invite you to a tea party? Why I can't take you to a ball being held in the rainy field I passed when I drove through Nebraska (Formal attire only)? It's that notion that it takes a concordance and cliff notes to get your phone number. That your heart is somewhere in this leather-bound mess of annotated case studies handed down from my father, that I'm supposed to worship it like scripture. No, the love I know was written at a third grade reading level. It's not long enough for chapters and there's pictures of butterflies on every other page. And all its really good for is draping over your eyes as you wander into someone else's arms, like a drunken game of pin the tail on the donkey. If its a study guide it just says "GO!"; if it's a test its one multiple choice question and every answer is "YES!" And I'm sorry but, all I've ever had are green pens.

On the ride home I look through my friend's moonroof at the stars and wonder if they're just more lamps of people I'm never going to meet. The alcohol is making my body pulsate softly with the night and for a second I picture myself at the doorstep of some distant quasar with a bouquet of daisies in my hand. Its a funny thought, but I feel a little better thinking it. Maybe there's a place out there where the circles pull in instead.

My friend Ryan, he just broke up with his girlfriend. They'd been going out since I met him, over seven years or some crazy amount. I got a drink with him and we talked for a while about love. He lets me talk first, like he always does. I ramble off the dumbest things, just like I do all the time, but he actually responds to what I say and discusses it, and when he does I feel for a minute I like I actually make quite a deal more sense than people let on. I tell him about getting drunk at the dance bar and he thinks its funny. I guess I do too, I mean, when you're sitting across from this heart-broken guy, its real hard to take something like that too seriously. He's older than me, not real old, but you can tell he thought he was done with all this. He tells me, "Listen Nick, one thing I've learned in the last two weeks, it's that you should always trust your gut. You're going to want to trust your head, but you can't. You're going to want to trust your heart, but you can't do that either. You've got to trust your gut. That's the problem with me. My gut's always right." I felt so bad for him. He looked so sad sitting there pretending that he's just lukewarm about the whole thing.

The things Ryan says usually make sense, so I try to believe him. He said some other stuff that night, about every girl being a lying, cheating whore, but I took that with a grain of salt. The gut thing though, I know what he means. I'm very much a heart person, the majority of the things I do don't make a bit of sense to anyone but me. I think that's why Ryan and me connect, we're both heart people. It sounds so terribly unromantic to let your stomach make all your decisions about love, but it is a very practical organ. Maybe I could be better of if I took some of its advice. I try to really consider it, but I just can't rationalize it. I mean, I know it makes sense, but I just can't have it. I just can't have anything

except what it is I have. If that makes any sense. That is to say, I know its not working, I know it just leaves me lonely again and again, but I couldn't possibly operate any other way.

We talk for a while longer and I tell Ryan I'm sorry about everything and that he will meet someone again soon. He groans, I forget that after all this that is probably the last thing he wants to hear. Don't worry, I say again, you can always be alone forever too. That's what I tend to do, its a lot better than people say. I'm really not helping but he can tell I'm at least trying to be sincere, so he laughs about it and we have one more drink and then leave. Ryan lives around the block so he sets home, but I feel this incompleteness still, so I wander of into the city.



There is a Light

There is a Light On

There's a light on in the cafe where you work and I think maybe I'm getting thirsty.

It's past midnight and I thought you would be closed by now.

Turns out the light was just your smile and you really are closed.

I say that and you laugh so I guess its not as cheesy as I thought.

You tell me the coffee's been dumped so I have tea but I don't take it to a table, I just start drinking it at the counter while you wipe down a bunch of stainless steel knobs and trays. I just keep chatting with you about whatever I think up and you do the same. Call and response. Tired plucks of an upright bass in a quiet night that neither of us seem to be appreciating or taking advantage of.

"Don't you have anything better to do on a Friday?" you ask.

I say no, and you say me neither.

We laugh a little. We're young but never seemed to notice it. We're happy we guess, but its nothing to get excited about. Every story we tell, there's this empty page at the end we're hoping the other will notice. God, your sad sunken eyes. I want to fill it with a thousand tiny verses but I can't write small enough to say everything I want to. No surface has every been large enough for that. But sometimes, too much isn't right. So I take the fattest black sharpie out of my heart, and recall the universal contents of the tired soul. Indelible, concise, uppercase Helvetica.

The tiles on the wall behind you shift and crane their ceramic necks because they see me getting ready, they know this one is going to be worth remembering.



These arms are a clothing rack, I say.



This kiss is the makeup you dabbed over the scar on your face when you were thirteen



My breath is erasing that note you wrote too fast in your
coworker's birthday card,



My chest is the shed you hid in when you wanted your parents to leave
you at Sam's Club,



My exhale is the moisture bleeding the ink of the love letter you dropped
somewhere in the snow when you were twelve.



These storm fronts in our heads, they catch the sunbeams before they have
the chance to reach us
And tell us to forget the stars
But let these whispers start the wind again

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May there be nothing subtle, coherent, or delicate in our demands

We want the sky

We want the transient and the incomplete

We want what was never possible, what was never real, what returns as
echoes when we throw it into these dark drunken nights.

We deserved this all along.



And I know, I see heartbreak everywhere,
even in me

And I know, as humans we were meant to break.

We were meant to hurt

But we were meant to chase

Until the tendons that bind us break

Like a thousand marathon runners crossing the finish line in first place



A chase; if anything, that's what it is.
If you've got the slightest inkling,
to a burning call,
Lace your cross trainers up.

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