



# PRISMA

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# Repeat

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Non-Fiction Prose/Provost's Literary Prize Winner

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At the end of summer 2013, I found myself living in England and I found myself having panic attacks. Like the land surrounding me, anxiety was foreign, and I didn't know how to handle it, so I didn't. I should've seen a doctor; I made an appointment and then cancelled it. I suppose it started on the ten-hour flight to Amsterdam in September, when my books stayed in the seatback pocket and I imagined the plane plummeting into the Atlantic. I cried my eyeliner into my sleep mask while a 70-year-old man in an elbow-patched cardigan snored beside me. After landing, the excitement of hearing Dutch spoken over the tram's intercom convinced me that I was okay, that I was okay even when I noticed the way canal houses lean forward like sinking gravestones, even when I heard the constricting whoosh of the Chunnel on the train to London, even when my aunt, who was traveling with me, brought up the London Underground bombings while we rode the Tube. For a while, I didn't have to remind myself to breathe in slowly, to breathe out slowly.

Earlier, in the spring of 2013, The National, a rock band known for their somber vocals and minimal, repetitive instrumentation, performed the song "Sorrow" for six hours straight, 107 times plus a one-song "Sorrow" encore. *A Lot of Sorrow* was a performance piece created by Ragnar Kjartansson, an Icelandic artist

who deals in what *The Believer* calls "heroic acts of repetition." Its description reads, "the idea behind *A Lot of Sorrow* is devoid of irony, yet full of humor and emotion. It is another quest to find the comic in the tragic and vice versa."

The National played in MoMA PS1's outdoor dome on a bare stage with a grey-white backdrop and multiple fog machines. Usually, these machines create a hovering fog around performers' feet, but because the performance lasted all afternoon, that fog seeped upward, cementing the band in a grey-white haze the same color as the dome. Outside was a pale blue, New York City sky, but inside was gray and gloomy as all hell. The band dressed all in black and white, everyone in well-tailored suit jackets except for the drummer, who wore a black t-shirt and compression wristbands and a terrycloth headband across his forehead.

"It was one of the most incredible experiences we've all had together," Bryce Dessner, the band's guitarist, told the *Montreal Gazette* of the six-hour "Sorrow" performance. "I never played [the song] the same way twice. So it ended up being this amazing band moment of finding endless variation in something very simple." The National's lead singer, Matt Berninger, said that because he only had to think about one thing, the day of the performance was the most relaxing he'd had in months. For some of us, though, repetition is not a comfort; it

becomes monotony, and monotony does not feel heroic or relaxing. For some of us, monotony feels heavy, like cement-colored fog.

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Before my aunt flew back to the States, she dropped me off at Lancaster University, a rural campus built mostly in a time of Brutalism. Red brick was nowhere to be found, every academic building made of slate grey stone. In recent years, the administration had attempted to liven up the campus with new housing complexes painted bright oranges and reds and blues, and my college, the smallest on campus and the one with the cheapest housing, had a spirited motto they screen-

**“MONOTONY DOES NOT FEEL HEROIC OR RELAXING.  
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printed onto royal purple sweatshirts:  
“Everywhere else is nowhere.”

Before I arrived in England, I *did* picture a place that made everywhere else seem like nowhere. I'd built up my romantic image over years listening to Britpop and looking at pictures of puffed-up sheep in rolling, Crayola-green hills. So I was disappointed to learn that my flat was not a stately castle—as a friend at home remarked, “Your school is younger than The Beatles”—and that I did not have a leaded glass window. *My* window, which never closed completely, looked out onto other buildings full of rooms that were identical to mine, rooms built for broke students. My bed, desk, and wardrobe were all made to look like birch, but they were laminate, and the walls and ceiling and curtains were the same white and the same grey as each day's sky. My mattress—which I saw often, as the bottom sheet did not fit properly—was

denim blue and the pattern was as ugly and unwelcoming as a bus seat. Everything about the room told me that the space was not permanent and would not accept any romantic projections.

My first night, I went with my flatmates—two other Americans, a Lithuanian, and the rest British—to the pub downstairs. Campus had nine pubs, and ours was the only one not trying to double as a nightclub. Instead of an open dance floor, we had low ceilings and large brown booths. I considered inviting out two friends from home who were also spending the term at Lancaster, but I never did. I knew Danica and Phil from a church group I used to attend, but we'd

drifted apart since I'd stopped going. I stuck with my flatmates instead and drank my first watery Carlsberg, which was not my last. Every Wednesday for the next three months, my flatmates and I circled around a booth, drank those cheap pints, listened to the same rotation of American pop songs, and lost the pub quiz.

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One of the lines in “Sorrow” reads, “sorrow's the girl inside my cave.” Many listeners hear “cage” or “cave,” but the band insists the word is “cave.” “It's meant to be kind of funny,” guitarist Bryce Dessner said in a 2010 interview. Like sorrow is something to celebrate. Even after watching that interview, I hear “sorrow's the girl inside my cave.” Really, it doesn't seem like Matt Berninger says anything there at all: when you listen to “Sorrow,” no matter how loud you turn up the volume, you will only ever hear, “Sorrow's the girl inside my cave.” He

looking for records I wanted that I knew I couldn't get home. As much as I love record stores, the music knowledge I assume the staff has frightens me, and when I'm shopping for records, I never know how to carry myself. I sift through rows I don't care about in an attempt to blend in with the regulars, and I dread the day some guy with a tattoo sleeve asks me what I like and my unrefined tastes spill out, like how I saw Coldplay *recently* from the back of a sports stadium and enjoyed it so much that I damn near cried. Still, I was determined to find something I wouldn't be able to find at home, so I fought through my nerves and talked to the man working behind the counter. He was middle-aged, as I expect most record store owners are, and his earlobe-length blondish-grey hair was combed back, but in more of a dad-with-a-Fender way than a Nick Cave way. He wore dark clothes, nothing memorable, with a face full of stubble. I told him I wasn't from there—"but you can probably tell without me saying that," I said, forcing a laugh. When he didn't reply, I told him I wanted something new to take home, and he asked what kind of music I liked. "I'm really into The National lately," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "they have this really deep mumbly vocal thing happening." He handed me a white CD that said "Withered Hand" and "Good News" in letters that looked punched out. The photo on the cover was a full-body shot of a man with long hair and flared jeans and uneven wings drawn in thick felt-tip. "The vocals on this are much higher," he said, "but it's also lyrically strong. Kind of like Conor Oberst too, if you like that sort of thing."

No one had talked to me about music in so long. I didn't know if my new friends were into the music I liked. I hadn't bothered asking them. "I trust you," I said and handed over my debit card. My favorite

song on that album is "Religious Songs." "I don't really know what I should do," it opens. "Like, should I be passing this bread along to you?"

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When The National's Matt Berninger sings, he clasps his hands tightly around the microphone and brings it as close to his mouth as possible without muffling the sound. His eyes close. He faces the ground as he rocks on the balls of his feet, and he leans forward on the mic stand like it's his only dependable limb.

"I very rarely make eye contact with anyone," he's said, "and [I] either stare at the exit sign or close my eyes. If I were conscious of the way people are watching me perform, I think I'd be too mortified and embarrassed. When you get into self-conscious spirals, you can't stop thinking about messing up and looking like an idiot." It's deliberate isolation, this way he performs, but as an onlooker, it makes the performance seem more personal. His bandmates play on, dance on, but it's hard to stop staring at Berninger.

When he sings without a microphone at smaller acoustic performances, his chin raises but his eyes remain closed. He arches his eyebrows, and his hands are in his front pockets, all like a kid hesitantly singing along to hymns from the back pew.

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A few weeks before heading home, I finally made an effort with Danica and Phil, and we took a bus two hours east from campus to spend a day in York and see its famous Minster. I don't know if the bus went up through the Lake District or down around Leeds or straight through Harrogate; we spent the ride talking, mostly about the differences between England and home. I spoke in the same

platitudes I'd been repeating for months: "I can't wait to have decent coffee again," "I miss real chicken wings," "the chocolate here is so much better." They talked about the new leaders at the church group where we'd met. When we arrived in York, we headed for an upward staircase so we could walk atop the medieval wall built over the wooden remains of its Roman predecessor, which encloses the city. It was a beautiful day and that meant it was still windy. We squeezed—literally—through a Christmas market along with what seemed like every other person in York, stopping for tea and blueberry and vanilla scones. Eventually, we made our way to York Minster, the largest Gothic cathedral in northern Europe. Danica and Phil didn't want to pay the £9 entrance fee, so I went in without them.

I spent an hour in the cathedral,

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mostly looking down at engravings marking tombs below the marble. I wanted to look up but couldn't. The closest I'd come to even considering talking to God was months before when a friend from my old church group asked me to help fund his mission trip. I told him, "I'll pray for you," but I'm sure he could tell that I wouldn't. I didn't. I guess I wasn't sure God was listening to me anymore, but while I walked past the Chapel of St. Nicholas, patron saint of children and sailors and brides, I stopped with intent to light a candle and say a prayer. I had never lit a prayer candle. I was only familiar with a casual Christian faith that lacked denomination and found itself in

auditoriums rented for weekly services, and I didn't have a lighter and couldn't find any matches around the pews. I wanted to ask someone, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Next to me, two women held each other and cried into handkerchiefs. I kept walking.

I imagine it is difficult to be an atheist in a cathedral like that, but perhaps the opposite is true as well. Maybe it is easier to remain self-contained and let the silence allow you to accept the reality of your size, the reality that nothing can see or hear you inside all that stone anyway.

There is a scene in The National's 2013 documentary, *Mistaken for Strangers*, in which Berninger is about to go on stage to perform for the largest crowd of his life. He is clearly anxious, he paces, and his brother Tom tells him, from behind

the camera, to go into the other room and scream to get himself worked up, to get his anxiety out. Berninger goes into the bathroom, shuts the door, and starts singing "Vanderlyle Crybaby Geeks," one of the band's songs, and the scene pans to the hallway, and from the hallway, we can still hear him singing loudly and a little off-key. In the movie, it comes off a little funny that in his panic, he sings a song he wrote. He doesn't scream something unwieldy. Maybe anxiety thirsts for self-defined familiarity.

At Lancaster, when I wasn't taking short trips, I was stuck in my flat by myself. Town was £3 and 20 minutes

away, so most days, I didn't bother leaving campus. Most of my friends liked to go out late and drink, and I didn't have the money or the social skills to join them. Instead, I spent hours of each day frowning at my computer screen, immobilized, ears covered by bulky plastic headphones, listening to The National. The dreariness was all I could stand to listen to and I was so goddamn sad that I couldn't even knowingly smirk when I listened to their song "England." I didn't really know what I was sad about and I don't really know now. I thought maybe I missed home but I knew that wasn't it. What I missed was companionship, what I missed was not being alone. Every week I had the intention of going to Writer's Society meetings and every week I didn't. I thought about it and my chest tightened. The panic attacks started. Some days I was sobbing in my bed at three in the afternoon or trying not to hyperventilate while finding books in the library. I told no one.

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As soon as I discovered The

## "IT FELT OKAY AND IT FELT GRAND AND MAYBE IT FELT BEAUTIFUL TOO."

National were playing in Manchester, only an hour train ride from Lancaster, I bought a ticket for the second night of their two-night run. I arrived at the O2 Apollo after my cab from the station drove around the venue in a big circle to up the fare. I dodged people at the coat check by tying my jacket around my waist. I skipped the bar. And once I'd placed myself close enough, I tried to make it look like I belonged. I overheard a group of boys talking about Lancaster and tucked my elbows to my sides, taking up as little space as possible while playing games on

my cell phone.

The band took the stage one-by-one and began with "Don't Swallow the Cap," a song with vocals much higher than Berninger usually sings. I heard one girl singing loudly a few people away; she held her interlocked hands below her chin as if in prayer. Berninger paced between songs, hitting his hands on his thighs, sometimes hitting the microphone against the side of his head, sometimes stepping off stage like we weren't even there, like we didn't matter. That's what made him mesmerizing. I had to tell myself to look at other band members. As they played, Berninger drank a bottle of red wine and when it was empty, he opened a bottle of white. During the encore, he jumped into the crowd, and I felt weird about touching him but everyone reached for him so I did too, touching the padded shoulder of his suit jacket. Here, it didn't feel out of place to connect like this. A man of roughly forty years put his arm around Berninger's shoulders and kissed the top of his sweaty, slightly-balding head.

They did not play "Sorrow." I'd studied the setlist and knew it was supposed to come early, so I tried not to sulk when instead they played songs I liked less. I had wanted to take "Sorrow" away as a souvenir. They did debut a new song, and I tried to make that mean something. I thought maybe the show could be my turning point, and it would be symbolic and beautiful and grand, like flowers in an old vase at the start of spring. I tried to make a metaphor in real time, but metaphors don't work like that. You don't get to create symbols as they happen to you.

But if you're lucky, if you're paying attention, you may get something else. "Graceless" began with Berninger's stumbling inflections, his voice ignoring the drums' brash repeated one-two; he coasted over them, letting his notes bleed together and rise and fall against the abrupt, repeated pulses. He picked up his mic stand and paced with it. The way his voice and the drums fought against each other was entrancing, almost like a lullaby. I liked the song enough before, but I didn't anticipate the smooth, whiskey-shot force it had live. Every time Berninger sang "graceless" at the top and bottom of verses I sang with him, and each time he was louder than before and so was I. He shouted: "Put the flowers you find in a vase. If you're dead in the mind, it'll brighten the place. Don't let 'em die on the vine, it's a waste." On the album, he does not scream, and this is the moment the rest of the band begins to overtake him. Berninger fades. But live, he turned those words, so introspective before, into demands. Live, he screams with joy.

Toward the end of "Graceless," Berninger stopped singing "graceless." He sang, "You can't imagine how I hate this," keeping the same inflection. Then he started singing "grace" where "graceless" was previously. "Grace" was the song's last word and at this point it was near the end of the show and I was shouting too. I don't do that, not at shows, not alone around so many strangers, but there it felt okay and it felt grand and maybe it felt beautiful too. I was looking up toward the elevated stage, looking up like I couldn't at York Minster. There I was shouting and it didn't matter if anyone saw me.

In my smiling photographs and memories of England, there are lots of other faces, lots of variation within simple moments. In December, a few

of my flatmates and I took an overnight trip to London, and we laughed at each other, and we helped each other, and we were stranded at Euston Station for a few hours on the way back because someone was hit by a train, and we thought about that but tried not to. And on one of my last days in Lancaster, I took a walk around the campus trail with two of my flatmates, and when I told them I hadn't realized how close to the motorway we'd lived, they laughed. "Oh my God," one of them said. "I wake up and fall asleep to that horrendous noise." And at every single pub quiz that fall, four desperate sets of eyes had darted to me when questions about literature were asked. When I got one right, four hands high-fived me.

In the one-hundredth "Sorrow," we hear Berninger's voice crumble until his voice is completely inaudible, until all we can hear is the swell of the audience members' off-pitch voices filling in the verse. It is defeated but it is more like resigning. He lets them take over.

Then, after the 107th "Sorrow," the band walked off the stage together and the crowd begged for an encore and the band returned and Berninger said "this one's called 'Sorrow'" and the crowd cheered and he shut his eyes and he leaned forward.