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THE LONG WINTERS'S "ULTIMATUM": LANGUAGE AND THE DEATH OF ROMANCE

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John Roderick, songwriter and guitarist for The Long Winters, told *CMJ New Music* that his songs are about "being with someone," with a narrow focus on relationships that don't work. [1] At the magazine's prompting, Roderick indicated, apparently quite reluctantly, a little bit about his song "Ultimatum," which appeared first as an acoustic bit on an eponymous EP, then later as a rocker on the LP *Putting the Days to Bed*:

I mean, I could describe what the song "Ultimatum" is about, the specific incident, but it would be belaboring the obvious. Everyone has been in that situation, where you really want to be with a person, you want to hold them and you think about them all the ... time, and you see it in their eyes that they're feel-

ing the same way, and you can feel them gearing up, preparing to say "I love you," and you don't want it, you don't want that moment to come. It's not that you don't want to hear it, or that you don't love them back, it's that the spell is going to break the second they put it to those words. Don't be in love with me *right now*, not yet. Just *want me*, passionately, for a little longer.

Roderick's expressed attitude, one that might be said to reflect the stereotypical ethos of the young hipster, is self-consciously self-centered. It is a mindset in which the "magic" in a relationship resides in the raw, unspoken and therefore unfixed emotion that fuels the tangling of bodies, but the "magic" disappears once the momentum is codified, once it is harnessed by language and framed by traditional expectations. Indeed, taking steps toward giving over to those traditional codes and expectations is associated with an unbearable loss of physical and emotional freedom. Roderick would seem to be depicting what is arguably one of the more common problems in relationships today, a tendency to worship infatuation at the expense of the many other essential ingredients in working relationships. It is a fixation with the first frantic stage of coupling that coincides with a dread of what happens when one "settles down," with all that is implied in that phrase. This dread can lead to a kind of emotional stasis and a reluctant retreat from

what may very well be a functioning relationship, and this sort of drama is at the center of Roderick's song.

The subject matter of "Ultimatum" may be familiar, but the way it is expressed is not always. Like many really interesting rock songs, "Ultimatum" is filled with highly emotive but somewhat vague and/or unusual language and imagery. Here Roderick's is not the style of contemporaries such as Death Cab for Cutie's Ben Gibbard, whose songs are often characterized by a simple elegance, familiar stories graced by beautiful, sometimes unusual but quickly grasped metaphors. Instead, Roderick offers a thick blend of attention-grabbing, highly emotive impressions and sentiments that seem to hang together rather loosely, challenging the listener/reader to stitch the pieces together into a more-or-less coherent narrative and tease out its deeper meanings.

The first important piece of information we get about the song is, of course, its foreboding title, "Ultimatum." Clearly, dealing with a demand is at the heart of the song. The lyrics eventually establish what this ultimatum is: basically, the speaker says to his lover, "I can/want to keep seeing you as long as you don't say you're falling in love." [2] The singer seems to feel intensely that he must walk away from an apparently enthralling relationship if the words "I love you" are uttered by his companion, the precise sentiment that Roderick laid out in the *CMJ New Music* piece.

The lyrics of "Ultimatum" are as follows:

Student why do you dream of me
When you dream of your acre of trees?
It was agreed: I came to burn leaves
It's all I ever claimed to do
A plowman I'll never grow into

My arms miss you, my hands miss you
The stars sing I've got their song in my head

Blue in the broad light of day
Your claws are snagged on my face
Say it: I wish we were naked
And I wish that I could take it when you turn on me

[My arms miss you, my hands miss you
The stars sing I've got their song in my head]

I don't want my words twisted
I don't want you to listen too closely
Or wait for me impatiently
And I hope I can keep seeing you
As long as you don't say you're falling in love

Crave translates into slave
No one can harness the rain
And I can make myself into rain
You'll feel me on your cheek and on your sleeve

[My arms miss you, my hands miss you
The stars sing I've got their song in my head]

I don't want my words twisted
I don't want you to listen too closely
Or wait for me impatiently
And I hope I can keep seeing you
As long as you don't say you're falling in love

But I can feel you about to forget
Yes, I can feel you about to forget...]

[3]

The first verse sets the table. Although there is no clear indication of it in the lyrics, I will operate under the assumption that the song is about a traditional heterosexual relationship. It is possible, or likely, that the images in the lyrics are grounded in the real experiences of the songwriter, but the ordinary listener lacks this context and is left with much to puzzle out. First of all, the

singer's lover is described as a "student," implying youth and, given the way the song unfolds, naivety, a lack of sophistication in the ways of romance, at least as the speaker sees it. The question, "why do you dream of me / When you dream of your acre of trees?" immediately links the student ("you"), property ("your acre of trees") and the singer ("me"), pointing to domesticity. But it does so within the context of the wildness of the recent intensity of the relationship; this is, after all, an "acre of trees," not a "duplex in suburbia" or some other mundane dwelling at the heart of yuppie life. Consequently, the common, often belabored fissure between passion and domesticity is established in the song's first two lines, and the fact that these lines take the form of a question reflects the speaker's exasperation that things have come to this point.

Next, the singer describes the limits of his commitment, at least at the moment. He begins with the phrase "It was agreed," implying that he and his lover had at some point come to terms, although the exact nature of their understanding, how clearly it was formed and how seriously it was taken by the lover, is unclear (perhaps a flawed "student"- "teacher" relationship is implied). Regardless, the singer insists that like some half-hearted itinerant groundskeeper, he "came to burn leaves / It's all I ever claimed to do." These lines begin clearly to establish the limitations of the singer's present commitment to his lover. And in this description, the idea of "burning," often associated with passion, would seem to reflect the singer's devotion to the euphoria of infatuation and physical desire. Then, taking things even further, the singer insists, "A ploughman I'll never grow into." This line clearly speaks to commitment: he doesn't intend to stick around to plow and sow (yet?

or literally "never"?), with its obvious sexual meanings. He is not wedded to the "acre of trees" or the one who would dream him there, with "dream" conveying the romantic notions of the dreamer but for the speaker shading into a word such as "trap" or "suffocate." So, from the outset the situation seems familiar and bleak: the woman wants a stronger commitment of some sort, is yearning to draw the man into a fairy tale domestic scene, one that she envisions them shaping out of her Edenic "acre of trees," and the man is at best flinching, and possibly insisting that it is never going to happen. Indeed, the singer suggests that his "student"-lover once "agreed" to his sense of their arrangement and is somehow breaking faith with him by inserting him into her fantasy.

The chorus of the song, repeated several times, emphasizes both physicality and the soaring highs of infatuation: "My arms miss you, my hands miss you / Stars sing I've got their song in my head." First of all, it is important that the singer's arms and hands miss the woman in question. Hearts and minds and souls, omnipresent in the language of romantic love, are conspicuously absent here. Secondly, there is the curious line "Stars sing I've got their song in my head." "Stars" could mean the shining orbs of the heavens, usually associated with wishes and longing and often imbued with various magical and religious connotations (perhaps implying a prayer to stop the lips of the lover from forming the dreaded words "I love you"). Or the "stars" could also be celebrities, as in famous singers whose songs get stuck in one's head, which connects infectious pop music with infatuation (Joyce Carol Oates's conjoining of pop music and self-centered teenage infatuation in the short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" comes to mind

here). In the latter situation, the woman is like the pop song that gets stuck in one's head. Of course, catchy songs eventually become stale (pop songs don't generally stay on the charts for very long), and that is being implied about the relationship here too—or certainly it speaks to the singer's deep and abiding fears. But, as it turns out, this is just a short peek at the chorus, which will be expanded the next time around.

The next verse begins "Blue in the broad light of day / Your claws are snagged on my face." On one level, at least, the word "blue" refers to the mindset, as in "to be blue" or "to have the blues," to be depressed or otherwise in a funk. Whether this attitude is being applied to the speaker or the lover is unclear; perhaps it is intended to reflect both the speaker's and the lover's frustrations with the state or direction of their relationship. Regardless, the "blue" is occurring "in the broad light of day," with its connotations of sunshine and warmth, implying that there is something about the blue feeling that is at odds with the lovers' environment, or perhaps with the way things could or perhaps should be in their relationship. Indeed, it is possible that "Blue in the broad light of day" carries with it a sense of the speaker's exasperation over the mood of the moment, presumably because in the speaker's eyes the funk is being needlessly brought on by his lover's (at best overeager) sentiments. "Blue" might also imply "out of the blue," the speaker's shock regarding the lover's behavior, described in the next line in terms of the feline response to neglect familiar to the average owner of a housecat, the usually gentle but sometimes overzealous and pain-inducing swat to the face. It is important that the claws are "snagged" on the speaker's face, implying that the wound, or certainly the depth of it, was unintended. Intent aside, the idea of

drawing blood (with "claws" and "snagged") is conjured here, and this is what attention-seeking lovers often do to their significant others psychologically or otherwise—sometimes going too far. In short then, an ideal scene ("the broad light of day") is disappointingly invaded by the blues, and the speaker is suddenly wounded by his lover's attention-seeking act of psychological (or emotional or physical?) violence ("Your claws are snagged on my face").

The next two lines are difficult to sort: "Say it: I wish we were naked / And I wish that I could take it when you turn on me." The "Say it" is especially tricky. At first blush, it may seem that the speaker, having just had his face snagged, is demanding that the lover say what is on her mind. But it perhaps makes more sense to assume that "Say it" is the speaker daring himself to say the words he wishes he could speak to his lover but for the fact that they would be devastating to the (well established) reasons he has been with her. In this context, "I wish we were naked" is the speaker's longing to keep things simple, to cling to the physical pleasures of the relationship, while "I wish I could take it when you turn on me" refers in a shorthand way to how utterly impossible it is to enjoy the physical aspect of the relationship without all of the other things, apparently for the speaker confining or frightening things—emotions, pressures, expectations, demands—that come along with it, the stuff that corrodes the purity he apparently sees in infatuation and coitus. Indeed, these two lines of the song seem to constitute a profound expression of dismay at the inability to keep a relationship simple—or, in the song's metaphors, to commit only to burn leaves or to surrender to a moment and bask in the broad light of day. Lovers, it seems, have a

nasty habit of asking for more than the speaker is willing to give and hurrying to complicate that which in the speaker's eyes should be—in its nascent stages, at least—essentially uncomplicated. The speaker ultimately refuses to address the nature of his and his lover's relationship head on: he flinches and impossibly hopes they can stall and drift backwards before they lurch beyond his comfort level.

After a screeching repeat of the portion of the chorus the listener has already heard, the lines about longing arms and hands and singing stars, come lines that lay out the speaker's desire to keep the lover physically close but to drive away the utterance of emotion: "I don't want my words twisted / I don't want you to listen too closely / Or wait for me impatiently." The fear expressed in these three lines is that the lover is—perhaps secretly but to the speaker obviously—longing for the verification of the nature of their entanglement with the words "I love you." Lacking this direct pledge, the lover seems to use the power of interpretation to try to assuage her anxiety on the issue, whether it involves spinning the speaker's words as confirmation or rejection ("I don't want my words twisted"), or trying to read between the lines, to pick up on subtleties that may not in fact be there ("I don't want you to listen too closely"). It is, however, important to note that the latter line may indicate that the feelings are in fact there, and that the speaker's fears stem from the implications of expressing them, which at the very least ends a stage of the relationship to which he is desperately clinging (in fact, as we will see in a moment, he essentially *demand*s the prolongation of this phase). The next problem the speaker expresses is the awkward pressure of having his lover hang on his every word as if he is on the cusp of uttering the phrase she longs to hear ("wait for me impatiently").

And next we arrive, apparently, at the ul-

timatum of the song's title: "And I hope I can keep seeing you / As long as you don't say you're falling in love." Obviously, on the surface the speaker indicates he can no longer keep "seeing" his lover (a commonplace way of referring to dating that emphasizes physical proximity) if she says she is falling in love. But by this stage of the song we are really and clearly in the realm of impossible hopes, as the subtext is that the relationship has already progressed beyond what the speaker can bear, that the worms are really already out of the can, or inevitably will be soon. So the overall sense of these lines is one of resignation, of a soul-heaving sigh and giving up. The lover feels she is in love and is dying to say so, perhaps to fish a commensurate answer from the speaker; meanwhile, the speaker is dying to avoid the subject. The ultimate effect is one of extreme discomfort and dissatisfaction on both sides; the rush of infatuation and romance has been displaced by anxiety.

In the final verse, the speaker begins by fully stating his fears: "Crave translates into slave." The notion that craving, or infatuation, is or easily morphs into a kind of slavery, a loss of self in servitude to a passion for another person, if not in servitude to the person herself, seems to be at the heart of the speaker's anxiety. Following this statement, we are told that "No one can harness the rain." "The rain" here is a natural force, like the feelings and impulses that lead to coupling, and these forces are defined as essentially "uncontrollable" (they cannot be guided or channeled or sustained to conform to some predetermined pattern or individual's needs). The speaker's allusion to vain attempts to "harness the rain" is in this sense tied to the speaker's anxieties about the ways language seeks vainly to capture and shape and mold feelings and impulses, with the notion that language and social codes ("love" and marriage and such) somehow strangle the raw

magic they entail. In yet another sense, the singer is beginning to associate himself with “the rain,” to hold himself out as an essentially uncontrollable force of nature, a notion one might say is built into his warnings to his lover. An obvious, additional layer of meaning involves the fact that “the rain” is a natural phenomenon that is associated with sorrow, often used in dark, depressing, or foreboding literary episodes in what was once called the “pathetic fallacy.” Indeed, the next two lines make this reference to tears clear: “And I can make myself into rain / You’ll feel me on your cheek and on your sleeve.” This notion of rain emotionally colors—or saturates, if you will—the final verse. The dark undercurrent here is that the speaker has the ability to “make himself into rain,” which is a reference both to his physical and emotional slipperiness, to his ability to wriggle out of the powerful clutches of the relationship, and to his ability to hurt the lover, to bring tears to her eyes. It all depends, it seems, on her response to the ultimatum of the song’s title.

The final, urgent repetition of the chorus reiterates the singer’s yearning. But now the listener fully understands how the chorus underscores the speaker’s intense struggle with an internal conflict involving his deep desire to be with his lover and his apparently stronger desire to feel unfettered by the pressures of the word “love.” In this last iteration of the chorus, after the final utterance of the ultimatum itself (“And I hope I can keep seeing you / As long as you don’t say you’re falling in love”), Roderick offers a melancholy, “But I can feel you about to forget,” repeated twice before the music winds up and fades out. Hence, the song ends on a foreboding note.

Finally, then, the listener is left to contemplate a relationship wracked by colliding impulses, both within the speaker and be-

tween the two lovers. The way the situation is described is vivid and deeply textured, giving a strong sense of the stress and strain of the whole affair, a sense of how two people can feel such deep longings *about* each other, but not be able to align their desires and needs in such a way that each is comfortable and satisfied. The desperation on each side is made palpable to the listener through the selection of familiar, simple imagery that, bound together, carries many layers of meaning about the way the two lovers are negotiating, or attempting to negotiate, the relationship. But, it seems, the relationship may be doomed: the foreboding “But I can feel you about to forget” at the end of the song indicates that the speaker is determined to walk away when, inevitably, his ultimatum is not heeded. And yet, there is a strong sense of regret in the subtext, so that the singer seems to be on the verge of breaking both his own and his lover’s heart. There is no doubt that the end of the song portends the painful end of the relationship.

For all that the song seems clearly to convey, there is much left to the listener. Is the agonized speaker some sort of commitment-phobic jerk obsessed with only the physical benefits of the relationship and genuinely determined to “never” become a “ploughman”? Certainly it is easy to hear the singer as emotionally stunted and cruel, and one could argue that the singer’s final warning to his “forgetful” lover is self-congratulatory, a victory for his “freedom.” But this is hardly the only reading available. Is the lover in the song really overeager, really moving in a fashion that any sober person would consider too fast? If so, would the singer’s fears and actions seem more reasonable? In fact, there are few clues about the larger context, about who is really or most at fault, if anyone, in the affair. Indeed, the listener could identify/sympathize with either the speaker or the lover, or just with the two people’s struggles

to mesh together comfortably. Hence, the song's strongest demand on the listener is interpretive; as with so many interesting literary works, the audience is the final arbiter, and different listeners may hear the song quite differently. But regardless of how one may see it, there is no doubt that there is something sad, and hard, and interesting at the heart of "Ultimatum."

NOTES

- 1 Roderick, John. "Long Winters: What's This Song About?" *CMJ.com*. 18 Jan. 2006. <http://prod1.cmj.com/articles/display_article.php?id=9047219>. I did not begin this essay with the goal of doing a researched biographical reading of "Ultimatum," and it still is not my goal; indeed, I will only go so far in filtering the song through Roderick's discussion of it. However, I stumbled upon this article while fishing for a little bit of background information, and as it is a piece that directly speaks to the meaning of "Ultimatum," it seemed impossible not to start with it.
- 2 Lyrics are taken from the album sleeve of *Putting the Days to Bed*, LP, The Control Group/Barsuk, 2006.
- 3 Lyrics are presented as they appear on the album sleeve, with bracketed insertions to present the lyrics exactly as they are sung on the album.

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