

The Beginning of Memory

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NICHOLE LEFEBVRE

A recent movie about The Beatles performed a resurrection. After a bike accident (and inexplicable, worldwide blackout) the main character wakes to discover he's the only person who remembers The Beatles. He pretends to write their entire catalogue, and soon travels the world performing it, out of order and with Ed Sheeran's awkward-jester guidance ("Hey Dude" is better, he insists). Two strangers who also remember The Beatles seek out the plagiarist, but rather than questioning his ethics, they thank him, pressing into his hands the address of a certain someone he should know. Deus ex yellow submarine. *Yesterday* leads you to believe he's about to meet Paul—never knighted, a paperback writer—or perhaps Ringo—passed by, made to cry—until the plagiarist arrives at a small, sand-worn cottage on the British coast, dunes bright as snow. John Lennon, never murdered, never lost, never mourned, opens the door.

As Lennon's living face lit up the big screen—those high, flat cheekbones etched with age—my partner Michael turned to me and groaned. "I don't like this," he said, and I agreed. It was an icky, unsteady gimmick. I felt toyed with, and then annoyed for caring so much, about a movie with no apparent aims toward reflecting reality, or true emotion, or art.

"And where's Yoko?" I asked.

We find her in Laurie Anderson's new performance "The Art of Falling," which begins with "a bloody murder death scream from hell." Spot-lit, Anderson tells the story: Yoko Ono, when she learned Trump won, tweeted a video of herself screaming for one full minute. "I hear it every morning," she tells

us and I say us, because although I'm sitting in an 800-person crowd, the space is intimate as a kitchen table, with Anderson's bright guiding voice, her dimples sweetening the words as she speaks.

As long as the current administration remains in office, she says, she'll start each concert on "a note of alarm," and then asks us, simply, to scream with her, dedicating the moment to Yoko Ono. Red lights rise up the curtain, matching my speeding pulse. "On the count of *one, two . . .*" Michael takes and squeezes my hand. Together, we scream, full volume, and all around us, the noise grows louder. I can't seem to think beyond the scream, louder still, or feel an inch of self-consciousness. My free hand pulls into a fist and I raise it, shake it. Sound pools in the air like a cloud. I refill my lungs, empty them into the scream again, feeling giddy with permission, and *good*; I didn't know I needed this, to be subsumed into an 800-mouth, bloody-murder-death-from-hell scream.

Anderson cuts us off with a green light, and now, minds and lungs purged, she reminds us: "This is just a story we tell ourselves." Crossing the stage, she picks up her little electric violin, which she hangs from her shoulder, a fifth limb. Her bow slides, lambent, and then her fingers pluck the strings, improvising a song with the cellist Rubin Kodheli seated next to her. Anger for the burning world steps aside, for a moment, making room for glee.

I pop a squirreled gummy bear from my pocket to cheek, and the sugar soothes my now raw throat. It's tasty. Green, I think. Strawberry. These days I need pockets of sweetness. I joke to Michael that I used up all my strength as a child (divorces, stepdads). It's not really a joke. I've grown softer, more aware of my needs and how to meet them (Zoloft, time off). I give in to cravings, let sugar melt on my tongue. At 31, I've had my first cavity filled. This year saw one, two, three ER trips. On the second, my body shut down at a different concert, Mount Eerie. Where did my thoughts go, the minute I was out? Of that time, I have a nothing memory. A memory, perhaps, of death.

"Being dead," Laurie Anderson tells us, "is no longer an obstacle."

Michael and I look at each other. His eyes widen, and he says, simply, "Yes." A poet, he writes about the life-shaping loss of his father when he was nine. Neighbors, uncles, family friends double-take at Michael; so often they tell him, "You look exactly like him. It's uncanny." that he feels he is living

out his father's afterlife. He tells me he likes when people say this; it makes him feel close to his father, proud. When facing a steam-fogged mirror, he can say hello, before reaching out and, with one movement, both wipe away the condensation and wave goodbye.

Death is no longer an obstacle to having a music career, Laurie Anderson means, and says she'd like to talk about holograms. "There's a big booming hologram industry," she tells us, "Mama Cass, Roy Orbison." She seems to take special, giddy pleasure in telling the story of Orbison's sons, who run a hologram business called "Roy's Boys." Anderson walks between intimacy and intensity, on to whimsy, music her bridge. In her book, *All the Things I Lost in the Flood*, she writes, "Music lets the mind drift, and reminds you of the temporary, provisional and interpretive nature of reality. It helps you float and flow." Holograms, in concerts, are a provisional way to time travel or to glimpse inside the bardo—and, never mind all that, they're also kind of funny. "Orbison is an easy hologram," Anderson tells us, smiling, her dimples diamond-glinting in the spotlight, "because he barely moved on stage." Part of the reason it's so fun to watch Laurie Anderson is because she, clearly, has so much fun, despite death's shadow splashed across her stage, ever-present.

And perhaps this is why *Yesterday's* resurrection of John Lennon didn't sit right with me, even though Yoko Ono gave her permission; the scene felt tonally off, a cold smack, more nightmare than dream. It took itself too seriously, its arrow aimed at epiphany in an otherwise gummy bear film. "The dead are the imagination of the living," writes John Berger in his book *And our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*. It's true, but which of the living are allowed to imagine the dead? Did you have to know the person? Or love them? Or love the one who loved them? Would Roy be mad at his boys?

The year we moved in together, Michael tried to show me what his grief felt like, or rather, he tried to film his grief and needed me to run the Bolex. I felt privileged to bear witness. He taught me how to wind the camera's silver handle, and how to ensure he wouldn't turn to an overexposed ghost on film, by holding up a gray card and focusing in. A box fan sat on the floor, pointed toward him. Standing on a chair, outside the frame, he held the hook of a wire hanger, and on it, hung his father's size XL button-up, a faded, ruddy orange and black flannel. In the film, the shirt fills with air, for a moment worn by an unseen body, but then quickly twists away and deflates. In the next scene, Michael sits, wearing the shirt and a pale pair of boxer briefs.

He takes a marker like a knife in his fist and traces a square onto his naked chest. Watching, you feel the cut of blade on skin. Filming him, I worried he wouldn't be able to sleep again.

Phil Elverum, who records music under the name Mount Eerie, lost his wife, the artist Geneviève Castrée, to pancreatic cancer in 2016. Their daughter was only a year old. "It's so intense to be observing the transition from a living person into a memory," Elverum said in an interview with *The Atlantic*.

"It's going to be an emotional night," Michael said, at a bar, before the Mount Eerie show. We each sipped a Greyhound, Café Van Kleef's specialty. A thick grapefruit slice balanced on the rim of my glass, and I squeezed it across the ice, then flicked it in.

Live, Mount Eerie's music sounded like snowfall, gentle accumulation. Like Laurie Anderson, Phil Elverum speak-sings, his lyrics placed in layers over his guitar. I leaned back into Michael's chest and he wrapped his freckled arms around me, nose nesting in my hair. During his first-ever snowstorm, back when we lived in Virginia, we trudged up the middle of a typically busy street, toward the only open bar in town. "Music lets the mind drift." At the bar's ping pong table, he said, "Loser goes streaking," knowing he'd win. He's never been a sore loser, and though he's the sort of shy to practice each word before he speaks them, he's confident unclothed. That night, we both ended up naked in the bamboo patch behind my apartment, that would become our apartment, pubic hair catching and melting snow. The chill dyed our skin pink. We couldn't stop grinning. Mount Eerie's music was beautiful and moving, but haunted and meandering enough to make my thoughts wander in the dark, leaving me feeling restless, nostalgic, provisional, a little . . . floaty. I decided I needed some water.

I'm just a little thirsty, I thought, that's all.

I kissed Michael and said I'd be right back. As I pressed my way through the crowd, my eyes began to blur. "Bathroom?" I asked an usher and she pointed up the stairs. I steadied myself, one hand on the railing. My vision turned black at the edges, lenses vignetting. I had to sit on the stairs and thought I'd be fine if I rested a minute. I'd be fine if I could just make it to the bathroom, where I would sit and splash my face with cold water. I rose again slowly and began walking toward the bathroom, and when I reached the hallway, bright as sun

on ice, I passed out. “Hear me out: what I thought meant death/ was just one body/ telling its story / to the next,” writes Michael, in his poem “Blackout.” I don’t remember falling to the floor, nor how long I lay there. What I know is, when I came to, I was confused, I was blind, I was nauseous, I was scared.

Laurie Anderson begins a new story, the phrases looping over cello music, in her way, a hybrid of talk and song. Head cocked, she looks like a curious bird, while singing about “an ancient play about birds from a time there was no earth, no land, only birds, making huge patterns in the air.”

She tells us that, in the story, a lark’s father dies, but because there’s no land, the lark doesn’t know what to do with his body. “There was no earth,” she says again, singing about the bird flying circles through the air, mourning. “And finally the lark had a solution. She decided to bury her father in the back of her head, and this was the beginning of memory.”

Michael, along with his mother and brother, scattered his father Jeff’s ashes in the Pacific, and as they tell the story, lovingly, the waves surged up to their knees, kicking away the plastic bag, sticking father to their cheeks and laughing teeth and their hair. Sometimes, when he’s sad, we drive to San Gregorio beach and say hello. Once during low tide, we ventured into a dark cave. Tucked up into a crack in the rocky ceiling was a bright red rose. “Thanks, Dad,” Michael said.

On the ground, a stranger kneeled next to me, a kind woman with a worried voice. EMTs rushed to our side. I tried to text Michael but couldn’t see the screen, my eyes still swimming in black ink. I pushed my phone into her hands and said, “Please, text Michael, my boyfriend.”

“Are you sure?” said the woman. “How long have you known him? Did you come here with him tonight?”

How wrong she had it. I said, again, “Please.”

When Michael and I first met, I was busy insisting I didn’t believe in monogamy, fixated on the five divorces of my childhood as a sign, certain I’d inherited the cheating gene from my father, but the longer we knew each other, the more I wanted only him, wanted a life spent reading in bed, sharing aloud lines that struck us as perfect, as powerful.

In another one of his films, the camera follows me walking through a graveyard. It's raining and I'm hungover, and we've spent the night fighting, but the viewer doesn't know this, nor the guilt I feel, nor his sadness tinged with light revenge, as he winds the Bolex, lets it spool. I'd kissed someone else, and when I told him she was only a friend, that it shouldn't matter, he grew sad, and I grew angry that our relationship wouldn't stretch to fit my every whim. "You can't seduce our friends while I'm out buying you a burger," he'd said. Then, more seriously: "I don't deserve that." In the last shot, filmed through the Jeep's rear window, he drives away.

Anderson begins to play a few notes, a soft yawning, followed by the celebratory fluttering of a wedding dance. The song feels careful and slow, yet uplifting. She's radiant as she plays, eyes closed, lips held in a tight line.

The recorded voice of a man hums a few notes. "Would you come to me, if I was half drowning?" sings the voice, gravelly and low. An empty chair sits, spot-lit.

Michael squeezes my forearm, and says, "It's Lou."

The man in the row in front of me shifts in his seat, blocking the chair on stage from view. All I can see is snow white hair. I let myself accept the illusion that his head offers: Lou Reed, who died in 2013, is sitting on stage, his voice poured into physical form. In her farewell for *Rolling Stone*, Laurie Anderson wrote, "Even when I was mad, I was never bored. We learned to forgive each other. And somehow, for 21 years, we tangled our minds and hearts together." The curtain lights up blue. A drum kit kicks on. Michael wipes a tear from the side of his nose. Had his father lived, he would spend this summer planning his parents' fortieth anniversary party, returning to the Japanese garden where they wed.

Anderson sings the words back to him, "Would you come to me, if I was half drowning?" Their decades-long conversation, their tangling, continues. "Pull me up," she says, pleading. "Pull me up by my hair." I feel a wash of sadness, and then of gratitude, for her openness, her willingness to strip her concert down to this gift. As Anderson reaches toward Reed, I'm left listening, wondering, hoping that he can—though bodiless—reach back.

In the hallway of the Fox in Oakland, an EMT strapped a blood pressure cuff around my bicep and asked if I'd taken any drugs. I said no, that I'd had one drink. I said I was going to be sick, and tried my best to push past the small crowd, into the bathroom, but instead the EMT held a blue plastic bag to my mouth and told me to lean against the wall. He continued to pulse the bulb of the blood pressure monitor as I threw up, with a velocity and volume that scared me.

“Keep your nose out of the bag,” he said.

I looked up and saw Michael running toward me, elbowing his way through the crowd, yelling my name. His face, broken with fear, was too white, his eyes and mouth too round. I wanted to tell him, I'm okay, but another wave rose from my body. I couldn't stop throwing up. Cold sweat ran down my temple, melted snow. The woman, Gwen I later learned, told Michael she'd found me lying on the ground. When I was able to speak again, I felt exhausted, my face slick, and said, “They think I was roofied.”

In her 2015 film *Heart of a Dog*, which braids grief, music, and joy, Laurie Anderson quotes David Foster Wallace: “Every love story is a ghost story.” I used to think the quote had something to do with jealousy and change: we stay haunted by the ghosts of others we (or our lovers) loved before, wondering what if? or how we measure up to a past fling; above us, the ghosts of people we used to be hover, those other selves, those older reactions. Did Anderson fear Lou Reed, at the start of their relationship, knowing his history with alcohol, heroine, abuse? Why didn't our friends question why I dressed as John, and Michael as Yoko, that Halloween we wore white and held up a War Is Over sign? It wasn't about gender; it was about personality.

As I watch Laurie Anderson reach for Lou Reed, past the afterlife, the quote shifts. Every love story is a ghost story, because love involves loss—loss of freedom, sure, but above all, the biggest loss. If you love, truly and deeply, a day will come when you start talking to a ghost.

I told Michael, driving home from the Laurie Anderson concert, that I've become too weak to be a widow. “I need to die before you,” I said, thinking not of Anderson's calm resolve, but his mother's eyes, so quick to cry, when telling even happy memories, how Jeff always banged his head on the low basement ceiling. She laughs when she remembers how “he'd scream ‘fuck’

so loud you could hear it in the yard.” I don’t think I could survive it. I don’t think I could, like Anderson, like Michael, turn the charcoal of grief into gem stone, into something shining—bright and blinding. Perhaps I drank too much sacramental wine as a child ever to become a good Buddhist, to ever feel anything but fear in response to death, but when I listen to Anderson, I want to try, as she says, “to learn how to feel sad, without being sad.”

Later on, after we left the concert venue, Michael sat by my hospital bed and explained how he’d watched the bartender make our drinks. “I really don’t think you were drugged,” he said.

“But I didn’t eat anything different than usual,” I said. Then, the light flooded in. “The grapefruit.”

“Oh my god,” Michael said. “That’s it.”

A small warning at the bottom of my medication’s instructions says not to consume grapefruit, as there is a known interaction between the fruit and Sertraline. Grapefruit inactivates an enzyme in the stomach that processes the medication, surging the amount in the bloodstream, causing an overdose.

“I should have remembered,” Michael said. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s my fault,” I said, “and also—neither of us could have known I’d react so badly to one glass.”

Michael nodded and then pointed at my blood pressure cuff. “I need to get a picture of that,” he said, laughing. The cuffs come in different sizes, and mine said, not Small, not Adult Small, but Small Adult.

“You really are a small adult,” he said, laughing again, until I joined in.

I told him *pamplemousse* was officially no longer my favorite word in French. We were still giggling while the nurse affixed the EKG pads onto my sternum and under my breast.

“While you were passing out,” Michael said, eyes in his lap, “I was listening to Phil Elverum sing about his wife’s death.”

It would be nicely full circle to say that what I’m about to write happened on the drive home from Laurie Anderson, but I can’t lie. On the way to the concert, when all we knew about the performance was her title, “The Art of Falling,” the car ahead of us hit a wild turkey, running across three lanes of highway.

The turkey flew, high up into the air without using its wings, and began to fall in large circles, seeming like it'd loop and loop and never touch the ground. Feathers floated all around, like a kiddie pillow fight or a snowstorm, sad but then, also beautiful.

Once, when Michael was “a little blue,” as he called his grief in our relationship's early days, I told him death is just the fear of death and we crumbled into laughter.

“Did that really happen?” Laurie Anderson asks herself, on stage, “Or was it some story?”