

You reference birds in almost every song on this album. Is there an ornithological interest, or are birds a symbol of something to you?

It's the fourth time Bryn has interviewed Evan Lassiter. She first met him when he was working in a record store full time and playing in three different bands in the evenings. Their first meeting is remembered only by Bryn. Evan didn't register her at all until a year later when she met him at a coffee shop overlooking the street where two gutter punks worked out an old time song on a battered guitar and fiddle.

Both, he says. Evan is alarmingly tall, but his voice is gentle.

I bought a house in the country, he says, and I've been watching birds a lot when I'm off the road. They serve as metaphors for a lot of things, you know? Freedom, but also loneliness.

It's interesting, right, how different birds stand for different things, Bryn says.

Doves for peace.

Cranes for long life.

Owls for wisdom or doom, depending on who you ask.

The phoenix for renewal.

Hawks for spiritual awareness.

Chickadees for optimism.

Hummingbirds for joy.

Swans for truth.

Crows are messengers or harbingers.

Storks are for good luck. Or for babies. Whatever.

Every meeting with Evan, other than that first one in the record store, has an album and a coffee shop associated. Bryn can recall them with the ease of flipping through a photo album. The self-titled debut: The Daily Grind—Bryn wore a purple t-shirt and her hair in a French braid.

The second album was *Caught in the green rushes with the tide going out.*

Dark Night of the Soul Coffee. Bryn wore denim trousers and red heels. Evan said, you look really well. Which was not the same as *you look really good*, and Bryn wondered about the difference for days.

The third album was *A Thousand Miles from Everywhere*. Evan was on tour with his band and they were all crowded around a narrow table at Iggy's when Bryn arrived. She was wearing a black jersey dress, one of her go-to outfits when she didn't want to betray anything with her clothes. The boys in the band were a jumble of black jeans, worn t-shirts and unwashed hair. Bryn felt her heart leap with both panic and familiarity. Evan rose to hug her. She put her arms around his waist and felt his hip bones through his clothes.

This album is *Early Frost*, its cover pearl gray. A row of pigeons on a telephone wire stretch across empty sky.

Bryn is in a striped grey shirt and a pair of skinny black jeans. Safe.

Evan looks even thinner, even taller. Gauntness suits him. His eyes are dark pools above his sharpened cheekbones. He's sipping pale, creamy coffee from a soup-bowl sized mug. They're at Black Magic, which is frequented by tourists and business people rather than the hipsters and artists they both know.

What did you give up to follow this dream? Bryn asks. As in, *what has music taken from you? What have you sacrificed at its altar?* She knows Evan was divorced, years ago. She knows he lived in a van for a while. He's been in at least a dozen bands, maybe a couple dozen. More than one band broke up over drugs. More than one former band member is dead.

His eyes are clear blue. Searching. He turns toward the window, rests his chin on his elbow. He crosses his long legs, says, nothing. I can't think of anything. This is the only thing I wanted.

He looks at her, and she recognizes the look. He trusts her. In the moment they're friends. She's familiar to him.

I was unemployed for a while, and not playing many shows, he says. I used to sit in my house all day and play music. I remember thinking that I could just keep doing that, just playing music by myself. Except eventually you run out of food and you have to make some money so you can eat. So if you want to keep eating, you've got to play for other people sometimes.

Bryn feels like she could stay there, listening. She wonders what else he'd trust her with. But she has what she needs, their time is up. There's no stopwatch, no sand dial. It's just a feeling. A sort of stop-while-you're-ahead feeling. She drains her coffee and stands up. Makes pleasantries. *It's*

always good to see you. Good to catch up. Hope to see you soon.

By the way, Evan looks up from his mug. You're looking well, Bryn. Thanks, she says.



It's a nervous tick, smoothing her hair behind her ears. Bryn can't recall a time when she didn't do it. All through elementary school, middle school, high school and college she wore her long hair parted down the middle (sometimes with bangs, sometimes not). It always curled in a loose C shape toward her face on both sides as a result of being constantly wrapped behind her ears.

Once she started her first real writing job, Bryn cut her hair. First in a bob and later in a pixie. The short styles broke her of the habit of tucking her hair, and later, when she grew it back to shoulder-length, she could go days on end without a C curl.

But the tick came back, one of her tells, when she's anxious, worried or excited. There were other nervous habits, but Bryn taught herself to hide them.

Problem vs. solution

- Shakings hands: fold hands in lap.
- Looking like a dork: Carry a compact mirror and check teeth for food particles and eyes for smudged mascara.
- Feeling like a dork: Keep apparel simple. Black jeans, plain t-shirt under blazer or streamlined leather jacket. Black jersey dress with knee-high boots. No suiting, no khakis, nothing too trendy or tight or short.
- Being a dork: Be prepared. Have good questions. Don't joke too much, but be friendly. Don't talk too much, but be interested. And, again, be prepared. That cannot be over-emphasized.



All summer, while the temperatures soar, hornets nest in the hollows of the steel guardrail that lines the pedestrian walkway on the bridge. Even at high traffic their metallic hum sounds a warning, like that of a live wire just waiting to strike, snakelike and vicious.

Now, on the last day of summer, heavy clouds bring early dusk and

a fog of gnats swarm the neighborhoods. There's no way to dodge them, walking past dense boxwood hedges, but the hedges end before the bridge. The hornets have evacuated with the last of the swampy heat, and in the steel-blue dusk, it's a peaceful stretch of concrete and space.

On the other side, a man walks slowly in his cassock like the negative of a ghost. A squirrel darts and stops and darts again. Kitchens cast yellow light onto darkening lawns.

All of these images are fragments of songs that will never be sung. There is too much else between the pure thought and the execution, too many distractions, too many doubts. But the impulse is there. The seed.

We will someday run out of songs and we'll run out of coffee shops.

Or, we'll never run out of songs and coffee shops.

The actual truth is somewhere in between. Life has afforded us so many meetings. We don't know which number this one is. It doesn't feel like a final meeting, but it could be.

We are able to love best the things that are right in front of us.

Or, we love best those things that have passed from us and can never be touched again.

It's hard to know, in the moment. The first listen to a song is not necessarily the time when it infects the listener with its intoxicant. That could happen the third time, or the tenth. Or it might sleep within the psyche like a dormant virus, its true contagion not waking until a decade later. The song plays and the brain is flooded with images, sounds, smells, emotions from some time long past. And then it's too late. There is no antidote.

What we share is unique.

Or, we are strangers who have become familiar through a job. But nothing else binds us.

Or, any bond is worth noting. Either through circumstance or coincidence we are connected in this world of randomization.

On stage, Evan Lassiter genuflects his lanky frame over the body of his guitar. His hair is a curtain over his face, his eyes shutter out the audience. But his voice goes to all of the places his gaze won't dare. The corners, the rafters. He's singing the songs that Bryn has listened to a hundred times, the songs they spoke of, the songs whose secrets he revealed.

But he doesn't sing them for her. This she knows.