

# Masked Dancers: Concern In So Many Things You Forget Where You Are

A review

@ALZZX

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#### Introduction

I have known about the album of which is this essay is based on for around a year and a half now, and in that time, it has gone from being a strange, almost inaccessible work to my favourite album of all time, and the band that made it also my favourite by a considerable margin. My first memories of this album are of seeing the cover somewhere on the internet, and liking it somewhat. Of course, taking a mild liking to the cover art doesn't always mean that it will become your favourite work of all time. I saw that the band was called "The Brave Little Abacus" and listened to their other main album, Just Got Back From The Discomfort - We're Alright. The opening sting of that album had me intrigued, but not necessarily sold on Adam's strange delivery. But forty the album passed (not without a good few repeats and pauses), and by the end, I had realised that perhaps, this band was worth checking out. After a while of listening to that album, I began to listen to Masked Dancers instead, and it hooked me faster. The EPs and the split grew on me as well, but none quite as utterly, allencompassingly as much as this album. Everything about this album makes me love it. If I ever say that there's anything wrong about this album, it's probably because of the fact that one of the songs somewhat overstays its welcome. But that is a small gripe when we're dealing with a genre-defying masterpiece. I must add, this album is so odd and so special to me (and I've listened to my version so many times) that there is a jump in the song (underground) at the part where he says "greet us" - and it seems to fit with the music. It seems possible it could have been added intentionally, just to jar listeners.

I remember spending quite a long period of time looking for music that sounds like this, and eventually coming to the realisation that The Brave Little Abacus has carved out their own niche within music, they're emo, but they're not utterly emo, they're just experimental enough to be labelled as such, and they don't fool around too much with any of the trappings of strange music. All of the longer songs are justified in their length - in fact, *I see it too*. would be welcomed if it was double its current length! In every single one of these songs, there is another five, smaller songs inside, which is a Brave Little Abacus trait which would become much more apparent in their second album. And all of these little songs, the tension-andrelease dynamics, they're all incredibly interwoven with the lyrics to create an amazing sense of fluidity.

Now, despite the fact that the band had been broken up for almost nine years at the time of my discovery of their work, and the fact that their collective experience of growing up would have been greatly different from mine, I can still thoroughly relate to the things they have to say, because what The Brave Little Abacus have done is create an album which teems with universality and cinematic climaxes, but without sacrificing anything to overly specific ideas. You would think that an album that contains lyrics which refer to a specific person would be too personal for anyone else to truly decipher - and, in a way, it is. The narrator of the album tells a story that is deeply about him, and his relation with the world around him, be that in the form of relationships or feelings about how he should interpret the world, and the changing dynamic between him and the world. These are all common themes for the genre which the album is mainly inspired by - Midwest Emo. They are from New Hampshire, however, so, I guess this is Northwest Emo?

Woe-ridden tales of leaving home and failed relationships are the backbone of many of these bands. Yet, when their vocalists cry and scream over the twinkly riffs, it seems like they're taking the general experiences of unrequited love, communication breakdowns, etc. and making them into

personal tales which the listener is supposed to relate to by means of correlating their own experiences. This is why a lot of emotional music is very difficult to get into if you're coming at it from a place of relative stability and comfort when it comes to relationships. Yet, The Brave Little Abacus do the exact opposite of this. They take these experiences that they (presumably Adam) have had and make them into things which are universals, something that is more than just a breakup played back over a crackly answer machine, something which realises that it's not just the personas of ourselves that interact with each other are wrong, but the very foundations of our egos are fundamentally shaky. We choose to ignore why we have strings of unsuccessful friendships in favour of lamenting those halcyon days. And that's where the album begins, by describing those days in a way that matches the warmth of the cover art, the warm sun, the green trees, the blank slate of a figure waiting to be filled with experiences, but scared to do so.

Also, before this analysis begins, I just want to add that pretty much every sentence here can be prefixed with the phrase "I believe that." It's my interpretation of this wonderful album, and perhaps there is a lot more to be uncovered, or perhaps it is merely a personal story that Adam wishes to tell, and we just get to listen to. Either way, here comes the most glorious four opening beeps in history...

#### I see it too.

The initial lyrics of *I see it too*. (which, for your information, is not only my favourite song on the album, but my favourite song - full stop) begin by taking inspiration from the cover. In the full version of the cover art, the treetops stretch beyond the traditional square of album covers, making it relate more to the "caress three clouds" line, the trees really do stretch up that high, creating a warm, cocooned place you can be in without fear. This, of course, represents home to Adam, he's looking up at the trees which touch the clouds - but ignores the sky for now, as the trees are still grounded in what he understands. The ground is static, and he wishes it would always be that way. But, the natural imagery gives way to a future vision of an "inexistent overpass", which prevents him from spending time looking up at the trees - there is "time only to breathe". All the while, a gently strummed guitar coupled with ethereal synths create a sense of a comforting blanket, but this contrasts with the lyrics, which show that sometimes things which blanket aren't always comforting, they can smother us. And this idea links in to the next image that Adam conjures up, of someone who is close enough to him both physically and emotionally that he wants to be able to "hear [them] breathe" - this is an important image which returns many times throughout the album. Subsequently, the idea of the "lone tree" is one that is also returned to several times throughout the album, and symbolises both loneliness, exposure, and also the idea of height, of being able to touch both the ground and sky, the real, the now, and the imagined, the future, the possibilities that life affords. When Adam continues about wanting to "melt into the pavement, or perhaps the grass", it's about wanting to stay in that permanently present state, to not have to wish or want anything to be happy, to just exist in a state where he can be content, and free from any further disturbances. After all, the lone tree is "cut to better real estate", the "rate of ringing" that he would experience high up in the sky makes him "yearn for descent".

All the while, Adam's requests to be in the 'ground' are juxtaposed against an external observer, who might see him dancing underground, happy and contented, and see that as a negative thing. However, there is a small realisation on Adam's behalf that he might have to change his mind about this, however, the way in which he commands someone else to "Alter mine." shows that he does not have the necessary selfdiscipline to want anything other than simple pleasures. Finally, towards the end of the song, he escapes from his underground soil-pile in a process similar to being born again, to being taken out of the primordial womb, he is "sifted" out of the ground, removed of dirt, he finally understands the world around him and decidedly "see[s] it too." After all, who wants to stay underground forever? Who could bear to stay in the comfort of their childhood home, safe but shrouded in the knowledge that things will be the same, forever?

The ideas that this song sets up will continue throughout the album - it is a full, story-concept album, rather than a collection of songs around the same idea. A thread runs through all of them.

# "but I won't always be on the receiving end!"

This is a song which abruptly starts from the previous one, a sample from Akira (1988) looped, perhaps repeated a few too many times to symbolise the amount of times Adam has had this sort of conversation before, the dialogue goes round in circles, and only one person is to blame - Tetsuo, an obvious parallel to Adam's plight within the album. Throughout the film, beginning at this exact scene, Tetsuo grows to a new level of power, unhindered by his childhood memories. But he doesn't control his newfound power particularly well. Perhaps Adam is suggesting that after he is born again in a more mature manner, he might abuse his perceived maturity, outgrowing his responsibilities and turning into an unhindered monster. To add to all of this, the dialogue of the sample is in Japanese, adding another layer of obscurity to the sample, confounding whatever surface level impact these lines of dialogue might have had. Also, the meaning doesn't obviously continue on from I see it too, so the effect is even more jarring due to the change in tone.

As for the actual meaning of the sample, I feel as if it is pointing out that to have done something stupid (in the context of the sample, to take someone else's bike for a joyride) is reason for guilt enough, but to be told what to do as a result and treated like a child is arguably more humiliating. This reveals that it's not the getting caught that garners the shame, it's the act itself. This is the first truly universal metaphor which the album attempts to convey, the idea that the things we have done weigh on our own shoulders, and a lot of the time, it's not until someone else acknowledges them that we realise that weight. And those repeated cries of anguish convey that point perfectly, the duality of both anger at yourself and anger at other people's perception of you. This imagery is also emphasised by Tetsuo's actions in the film itself, he is a shy, quiet child who is afraid of confrontation, but when he 'grows up', he is left with a lack of consequence, and so begins acting irrationally.

#### a map of the stars

A few months ago, while listening to this song, it dawned on me that despite my opinion of this album as very possibly my favourite piece of music I had ever listened to, I only knew a small portion of the lyrics. Fragments clearly audible above the cacophony were all I had, and I never thought the lyric sheets were much help. I could barely interpret which lines went where! For most other songs, the lyrics are laid out in short lines, more like how poetry is laid out on a page. The lyrics of The Brave Little Abacus are set out more like continuous prose, a stream of consciousness of thought, not split up into individual fragments. The images all cohere together, sometimes too much. Adam uses a technique to make sentences run on to one another for longer, by making the last words of one sentence the first few of another, which is used throughout the album, first here in the "I will admit I was fine with the assist / yet exploitation / multiplied and grew and lastly grew again"

As for the actual content of the song, Adam is thinking more and more about the concept of growing up and leaving his childhood home, and is afraid to talk to his parents about leaving before he's had time to fully soak in the beauty of the innocence of childhood before 'moving on', so to speak. As soon as he even thinks about telling his parents "how much I see in this", he is quickly moved on, the lexical set of technology (wires and plastic, similar to the overpass of *I see it too.*) coming back to remind him that the real world isn't comprised of grassy knolls and bright skies. Instead of sleeping in the "treefort bed" that he mentions later on, it's the cold hard floor for him - possibly also symbolising that he isn't sleeping next to someone he loves because of a breakup.

Adam further describes his childhood as "assist yet exploitation", which ties in with his need to leave home, so as to not be pressured by the people around him. After all, Sandown, which the band is from, is quite small, spare and homely. But this help that he's received develops with him, and eventually the changes in his character which developed as a result of the help morph into a guide that can help him in his future among the stars. This idea of Adam's character splitting into two, his past self and his current self, is present here - the "map of the stars" will give his present self the ability to find the childlike peace that his past self does. In their next album, Just Got Back From The Discomfort - We're Alright, The Brave Little Abacus would explore the concept of these two selves interacting with one another, commenting on each other, being friends with each other. But for now, the issue is unresolved, the distinction between his "boy" and "man" selves are not far enough for them to completely differentiate between themselves. They are still inextricably linked.

Returning to the idea of the knowable, safe ground versus the uncertain sky, Adam explains that he takes this ground and throws it to the sky - he attempts to frame what he knows in what is unknowable, and in doing so, removes any certainty in the things it is possible to have certainty in. Instead of understanding both elements of his world, he is less stable and understands them both less. But, as humans, we try and seek higher meanings to things, even when there might not be any. Adam understands this, his next lines are a reductive attempt at explaining why we feel the way we do, "the skull is what's inside". 'We are but deterministic chunks of matter', says reason, but why does anything feel like anything if that's so?

Once again, Adam returns to the "I want to feel you breathe" line, this time in the context of his brain "spew[ing]" almost random thoughts - and yes, the line is delivered randomly, showing that Adam's unknowable subconscious has dug that thought up again to bring to the forefront of his mind. In this section of the song, Adam acknowledges the difficulty we face when our perception of the world as a living, free thing collides with the scientific, deterministic zeitgeist of today. It is incredibly difficult to reconcile the two ideas, and even harder to accept one over the other. Are we just "brain matter", spewing out thoughts and words in accordance with the laws of physics, or actually able to control our thoughts? Clearly, there is a mix of both. When we experience an unfamiliar memory float to the forefront of our minds, it is not a conscious operation. The unconscious memory 'arrives' at consciousness. But through what process?

A secondary character, Ken, is introduced, to provide an antithesis to Adam's desire to grow - he stops him from thinking about what he sees in the sky, in his future, and resigns him to sitting in the "distraught earth". Adam is likely to serve this punishment as he cannot escape the metaphysical clutches of Ken by himself - but thankfully, someone else, perhaps his past or future self, or a lover, comes to his window "in the form of a map of the stars" - letting him once and for all leave home, with someone to guide.

# waiting for your return, like running backwards

This is a short 'bridging' song, one which is ostensibly the beginning of the second movement (if we are now to retrospectively add movements to this) in which Adam's vague usage of the word "you" can be interpreted in many ways. A favourite of mine is that the self-interruption and repetition of the single line in this song is directed towards two different people - the first 'you' being directed towards himself leaving home, and the second you is directed towards the concept of nature leaving his home, lamenting the trees being "cut to better real estate" once more. Perhaps we can see more meanings in that previous phrase now, he not only means the physical nature of trees being cut down for housing, but perhaps how solitariness is becoming increasingly difficult to find in a world that wants you to keep going, exploring, to see new people in new buildings - leaving no time for quiet introspection.

#### (through hallways)

This song continues on with the momentum of the previous one, and builds on many of the images in the songs from the first movement. The first of which is the idea that Adam is concerned with what he "see[s] in this", which is described as not necessarily a logical thing which he can infer from his desire to leave home, but a burning feeling which can't be explained. So, the first thing that the "you" in this song does is to take his eyes out and "cut open [his] chest", he can no longer see, or even see anything in this - with his heart removed, there is no feeling. He is merely being pushed on a gurney through hospital hallways.

But there is still a desire to see the world around him - he wants to see the grotesque sights of "bleeding... hands", despite the fact that the real world is often horrible in this way, and also the fact that the man is attempting to steer him back towards his childhood innocence, "oh, can you please just not hear me", he wants to see it. This bodily imagery is continued on with the line following "Inflammation!" - where, in an accurate diagnosis, Omega 3 does stop general inflammation, while Omega 6 promotes it. He also wants to replace his "dying dignity" (caused his shame at himself for not leaving home) with "vital circuitry" which will let him override his passionate feelings of leaving home and make him feel comfortable where he is, to disregard the crumbling of his own home, to ignore the "never-ending sound" of trees being cut down.

The next section of the song is dedicated to explaining the dichotomy between curiosity and knowledge. Adam seems to understand that the world is full of "tall tales" and because of that, he knows to not be convinced to give up his comfortable life in exchange for these lies - but, perhaps, there is something out there. There might be something, and below the outward

"screaming I don't want to go" there is a truth - Adam himself is telling a lie in outwardly proclaiming that, yet he wants to know if "I could even handle it". There is an interesting connection between these two points, despite the fact that he screams both before and potentially during his venture into the outside world, he still wants to "Leave home", as clearly stated at the end of the song.

# "he never existed in the first place"

This is the second song from the album which samples Akira. This time around, the sample is from later on in the film, when Tetsuo is at the peak of his power, and is bleeding from his amputated arm - echoing the "bleeding from his hands" line from *(through hallways)*, and demonstrating that the real world can be hard to manage. Tetsuo fails to control his power, and then, shortly after this scene, his power ends up controlling him.

The title of this song comes from the first line that Tetsuo speaks in the sample - and shows that perhaps Adam thinks that when he grows up and leaves home, he will leave his predecessor child persona behind, and forget who he used to be.

Another parallel between Adam and Tetsuo is that they're both screaming, despite having only left home for a short time, their "power" is new, and seemingly unbounded until they crash into the limits. In this scene, Tetsuo is asked if he is okay, seemingly by someone who wants to help, but he instead refuses that help in favour of seeming strong, he reforms his arm out of wires and metal, and later on it grows to the size of a stadium, consuming everything in its path in order to keep growing. Perhaps, through the extended metaphor of the context of the sampled scene within the film, Adam shows the pitfalls of growing up and leaving home, but also the freedom it can afford.

# born again so many times you forget you are

This ten-minute long song is arguably the centrepiece of the album, and has a title that is similar to the album's title, they both echo the same sentiment. Upon first glance, the title of the album might seem like a negative thing, being concerned about so many things that you forget the most basic of things. But I would like to say that this title is what Adam believes we should strive towards. In the last song, we saw Tetsuo not being concerned about anything, his unlimited power affording him the privilege of not being concerned about limb amputation, or the fact that all of his friends are concerned for him. This, by any means, is not a good thing. Having concern for others, for things we love, can make us forget about the intricacies of where our homes are, because if we know enough about the world, we can feel comfortable anywhere, the universe would be our home, and it would be impossible to leave it. In a similar vein, being "born again so many times you forget you are" shows that the process of maturity, of being "born again" out of the soil, should be a continuous process, not just something which happens the once. The change from the childlike-prepubescent mentality to the responsibilitiesteenage mentality is not the end of personal growth, there is constant opportunity for change and improvement, and learning how to know that is one of the most important skills for being human. Also, "forget[ting] you are" could symbolise the death of ego and egoistic actions for the person, showing that they have grown up so much as to forgo the limitations which many people have. In this sense, they are no longer a 'person', they are more significant than that. However, the title of this can also be read in a negative way, someone who has lost all sense of their self can lose awareness of themselves in relation to others - much like Tetsuo.

But, the song must begin, and the lyrics are aimed more towards a relationship that Adam has had, one which. regardless of its nature, has terminated, he wants the other person to "take it back" before his over-analytic mind turns this one statement into a "sea engulfing souls". Every time the size of the tear-based sea increases, more "burdens" are placed on his shoulders, every analysis of someone else leads to selfanalysis, rolling round in circles until it spirals out of control. The other person in question says that "it's distant", suggesting that they think that the statement is in the past, it should be moved on from. But Adam's reply of "it's distant!" shows that he feels differently, the intonation of his voice suggests that he thinks the fact he feels so strongly about something that happened such a long time ago doesn't mean that he is overreacting, but that the event itself was traumatic enough to warrant this massive response.

The next section of the song begins a semantic thread which The Brave Little Abacus weaves through their work, that of driving, and cars, in relation to how they offer freedom. In Adam's case, being able to drive is the main difference between being a child and an adult - you no longer need an adult to ferry you around if you know how to drive. This sentiment has been expressed before in their split with Matt Aspinwall, where the lyrics cry "I just want a car, so I can visit friends, so I can travel far, like a ghetto superstar." So, we can say that driving is an important part of growing up in a fairly sparse American area like Sandown.

Leaving that idea alone for a second, we can return to Ken, who Abby is trying to convince that there is something behind what Adam says, there is something grand about his desire to leave home - "this is big, this is real". Perhaps the veiled figure "wrapped in yarn" which Adam longs for is like Abby, someone who tries to push him towards his own independence, but still has the comfort of home about them.

Yet again, we have Adam repeating a sentence with a different tone in order to change its meaning - "I'll let these pedals push themselves" delivered in a calm tone by Abby seems to convey calmness, perhaps contentedness to let someone else drive for you. However, Adam's second tone seems to incredulously repeat that statement - it seems to say, 'how could you let someone *else* push those pedals?' The idea of letting go of egoistic trappings appears in the title of this song, and here it appears once more, Adam is not as grown up as Abby, and still wants to be in control of everything, who he is, where he is, where he's going. But letting those pedals push themselves doesn't mean that he's resigning himself to living on autopilot, it's more akin to a statement like 'go with the flow'.

After that, Adam reveals a way in which he could have controlled his own life, he "could have kissed her", showing that he feels a regret for how he acted in the past, and wishes to change his past in order to perhaps disobey the things "you've taught me" in order to appear more adult.

Furthermore, all these things that the vague "you" (which is likely intentionally vague, a plural 'you' to mean the collective influence of the world around him) has taught him has not meant that he is able to kiss anyone or do anything that he wants to, he's been paralysed with "thoughts unsound" and "ideas of infinity" which are both unhelpful concepts. If thoughts truly remain unsound, then we have no time to think about them properly, to understand why we thin that way. And if he's thinking of "infinity", then it is likely he's focusing on abstract concepts which have no notion of time about them. If the ideas of love never end, if the feelings we have as humans seem to be timeless, then why is his physical body growing up, seemingly disobeying his feelings? In this section, Adam highlights a dissonance at the heart of human life, the feelings which we are used to feeling do not age or tire, but the physical bodies we feel them with do. Once again, the reductive biological explanation is not enough to combat this primacy of emotion in our lives.

In the next section, Adam is yet again "Born again" and reminded that there is a ground beneath him, but also that this ground stretches around to the four corners of the world. There is an interesting double meaning here, in that it could either mean that he is being grounded by remembering there is ground, or given room to explore and expand by being reminded the ground is so expansive. This dichotomy is yet again at the core of the lyrics here, to be up in the sky looking down at the ground is good if we want to feel good about being better than others, and being stationary on the ground is comfortable and stable, but the hardest thing to do is both resign yourself to the responsibility of the earth without the freedom of the sky. To be stuck without ultimate power, walking from place to place, is difficult to resign oneself to. But, if you were able to fly above the earth like Tetsuo, the power would corrupt, the world, in fact, the universe, would no longer feel like 'enough'.

The next segment of lyric, "doorway scene makes time for peace in a nearby ravine" appears later on in the song as well, the "running towards the exit of a university", and also later on in their discography, in *Can't Run Away*, a doorway is mentioned, but this time, the doorway scene is made fully clear, the "kiss me!" climax of that heavily meta-cinematic scene needs time for an accompanying "ravine", the excitement of life needs something to accompany the low points, and I feel that Adam is suggesting the beauty of nature can fill those in and, by extension, that we should leave nature alone.

Returning to the bodily imagery first displayed in *(through hallways)*, Adam's ears no longer seem to work - he doesn't hear anyone coming for him, his life appears to be empty

without the smallest of sounds, which is a lovely image. To know someone so closely that you know the sound of blood rushing through their arm is wonderful. But to be suddenly deprived of that is an act worthy of the reaction that he gives, earlier on in this song.

Next, there is a metaphor which takes some picking apart, and is purely my opinion. Adam has said that he "can't hear anything at all" previously, but then uses "anything at all" as a noun to describe something else - which I believe to be those same people who told "tall tales" earlier, or people like Ken, and those people think their reflections aren't "the mobile ones". Now, Adam has previously made the allegory of him having two selves, and perhaps he is saying that those other people neglect their child selves, and believe that they have fully outgrown them, without any responsibility towards them (as Adam would later show towards his child self on Bug Infested Floorboards) and are worse for doing so, as those child selves are capable of helping you out - perhaps, in the form of a map of the stars. These child selves also grow twice as fast as we do, for they are still maturing physically, but people who are older than they are mature mentally much faster than them, at least, they have the capability to do.

At this point in the album, Adam has fully made up his mind to run away, but even though he has ventured out into the world and seen "broken bottles.. cutting at the meek", he is still running away - now, from the horrors of the outside world. Perhaps there is a certain shame in not being able to stand up to the real world, because even "third grade students" are allowed to run away from their homes (to get to school). Now, he is faced with the prospect of "running towards the exit of a university", a reversal of the grade-school problems of having to go to school. Now, his choice is to leave, not to escape, as there is nothing to escape to, he knows what the world is like, and it doesn't feel like release from the clutches of home. Furthermore, the "progress" and "golden painted headdress" are likely things that someone who is already in the real world would say that it's like (of course, telling lies, idealising progress and material wealth), so telling a child that they're not old enough to go to the real world isn't true, they have the capability to grow and learn, and not exposing them to the real world for long enough can cause them to get fed up - perhaps, as Adam has done himself. But, after taking matters into his own hands, he realises that he's not only being smothered in his own home, his warm earth, but others who he thought had grown up are being smothered in their very own, much more advanced way, they are waiting to be born again, above the pitfalls of the modern world - much like Adam waits to be born again and given freedoms.

Another image which recurs throughout this song is the pine trees. At the start of the album, they seem to symbolise his grounded nature, but now that they're singing "leave home" to him, perhaps the fact that they reach up to the sky is once more relevant - they don't want him to be cut down with them. Perhaps this is a bit of a stretch, but we could consider an analogy to Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree, especially since it appears in Matt Aspinwall's side of his split with The Brave Little Abacus. These trees symbolise the people who have given so much to him over the years and helped him along his way perhaps, his father, who likely instilled his love for music. These figures don't necessarily say outright "leave home" but instead gently sway in the breeze, softly chanting it with every back and forth of their branches - something reflected in the singing at the end of (through hallways). Also, something else to note is that the characters in this world seem to all be Adam's age - no one above his age seems to have a direct voice, the album is suspended in a sort of Peanuts-esque state, but those adult influences seep through.

These influences eventually make his mind up for good - he is going to leave home, he has logically come to the conclusion that leaving home would be good for him as "The act of preservation is acting nonetheless" - signifying he thinks keeping things how they are now would be unnatural, like attempting to capture a childhood in amber. Once he has taken his time to foray out into the wild world, the pine trees (adults) in his life could be seen talking about different things, as he ventures further and further away from his home.

The crux of the 'tree-as-parent' metaphor comes in the next subsection of lyrics, his "treefort" could mean a small place he has carved out from underneath his parental guidance, somewhere where he can be away from the ground and safe in the knowledge he won't be disturbed. All that is left to disturb him now are his thoughts, and the thought loops infinitely close in on him, his imagination working in overdrive imagining the wonders and horrors of the world out there, until he shouts "I can't do this anymore", and officially, for the last time, definitely wants to leave home.

The final image that he leaves us with before the song is over is one of "meeting gods I don't know". It's clear that from his earlier mentioning of "the god I never knew" that perhaps this doesn't necessarily mean he had a literal religious experience, but perhaps that he talked to someone who he thought was better than him - someone who had been born again so many times that they had achieved rebirth in the form of a god, showing that Adam might be pulling on more than one cultural idea of god. But, the theory of his idea of what 'god' might mean to him that I like the most is one that the unconscious psyche is represented by god in this context - he doesn't understand it, and it doesn't understand him, as he is far too much of an ego (not necessarily in a negative way), and has not had enough personal growth to be either understand or be understood. And each and every time he grows, the unconscious changes, and he "keeps meeting gods" he doesn't understand. Of course, an alternative explanation is that he sees other people who seem to have conquered the world - as walking gods, perhaps, those who truly understand.

### *(underground)*

Coming in from the explosive end of *born again*, this song begins as a much more reflective, introspective song in which Adam addresses certain characters in his life in a pretty disparaging manner. Those who told him to stay at home were perhaps right when they said he would be "Staggering" or "bound to fall", but that doesn't make them right. Adam learning from his mistakes in experiencing the world around him doesn't mean he has to be chastised for any injuries - those are learning experiences, after all. Those very same people are also attempting to confuse other people are who are waking up to the concept of leaving home - and, over the course of this song, we see how Adam has been convinced to stay underground, through use of "picket sign[s]".

These picket signs are generally placed in the ground, placed outside houses on lawns - the mere concept of 'picket sign' invokes ideas of lush suburban US lawns, perhaps a 'picket fence'. All of the related ideas are seem gentle, perhaps the content of picket signs aren't so much so, but Adam's cry to "burn it to the ground" seems to say that they're something worth retaliating against with force.

A recurring phrase throughout this song is "sleep sound while you're tread upon", which, at first, seems like a comment that Adam is making towards those who haven't been born out of the earth yet. However, there is a double meaning to this phrase - either it's a sarcastic comment, playing on the common 'I hope you sleep well tonight' trope, or it's a genuine wish for those who have not woken up to the horrors of the world to keep sleeping, to keep on not knowing. Perhaps, this suggests, there is some merit in remaining ignorant. However, later on in the song, this doubt in his plan to leave home vanishes, he wishes to be told lies, thus knowing that they are lies. If he knows what he's hearing is false, then he can infer some truths from that. Working back from this section of the song, we can see that Adam's metaphor of 'growing' returns here, juxtaposing personal growth through the taking in of new material and the puppet Pinocchio, whose nose grew whenever he lied.

Adam's relationship with this other person is elaborated upon in this track as well, his love for her is almost obsessive (to him, at least), he understands his "over-analytic side" - a side which is frequently discussed in Just Got Back. This side of his being doesn't allow him to take comfort in nothing, there has to be things to do, to discuss, to analyse, otherwise it turns in on itself, trying to analyse nothing and finding everything. This "over-analytic demeanour" (Pile! No Pile! Pile!) allows him to analyse the absences of people and find them there, every feeling of longing, feeling like it was caused by a physical void. And when there's no one else around, the brain invents crowds looking on, creatures of the night, to fill that gap - which scares Adam. Perhaps this emptiness scares him about his home, he doesn't want to be stuck with himself in a "quiet" home, he wants to venture out there into the busy world once more, even though there might be negatives that lead from it. In his note to another person, Adam writes "I felt you right there with me and together we felt them" - which is interestingly ambiguous. It could either be a reassuring note to someone who you shared an experience with, or something akin to the description of a dream. If Adam did has really "felt them", then surely the person wouldn't need to know? They'd have had the same experience, and thus Adam wouldn't have had to write. This is another example of Adam's over-analysis creeping into relationships.

But, in this case, the haze of over-analysis caused by being cooped up underground begins to fade into a red wash of rage, "let's burn them to the ground" - he is not merely content with the moving on from his childhood mainstays, but he wishes to remove them so that other people who were previously "confuse[d]" don't have to go what he went through. The person to make all of this underground haze go away is that significant other which Adam keeps referring to, she seems to know what's happening - comparable to the "gods" that Adam said he kept encountering. She understands that this "scene is that of a film's" and that its "superfluities" are now visible to him because of what she's shown him. This is seemingly the last scene of childhood, the step into the outer world where nothing is rehearsed - an idealisation, but one that Adam would likely have made at this stage. Of course, all of this new knowledge is not coming without resistance, he still screams "I don't want to know" - but then quickly goes back to "Next slide please", showing that perhaps there are, yet again, two sides to his persona and how they think about leaving home differs.

The very last thing in this song is an admission of responsibility, "I don't know why I am underground". This is a pivotal moment in the album, because it's the first time that Adam admits that perhaps, he doesn't know what's up with him, let alone the world around him, whether that's the clouds or the ground. He realises that relying on someone that he can trust to really help him is perhaps the best way of going about these kinds of things, he doesn't need a negative Ken or his parents, he needs someone to bounce off of, to be informed by and to truly absorb those lessons at a fundamental level. And, at the end of this admission of guilt, the song slides wonderfully into the ending segment, and Adam has left home.

### remember to wave (when looking down from the clouds)

Having departed from home, the troubles are not over yet - the other person speaking to him is being refuted by him, to have their own opinions asked to be swallowed up by themselves. He disparages himself, having moved on from admission of guilt, perhaps spiralling into self-critical thoughts over one mistake. His mouth is certainly not a "bearer of shit" as he says.

Next, the two-sentences-that-flow-into-one-another trope is back again, with "That mouth, what it said I can pronounce" and "I can pronounce an opinion with its worth" slotting together to make one continuous thought, which probably steams from Adam's mind attempting to reconcile all the new thoughts and experiences that he's having while up in the clouds. There is, as he says "too much progress", something which he sounded incredulous about earlier. When he asked a nameless figure to "tell them of your progress", it seemed as if he was egging them on to reveal a lie, he thought that they had nothing to tell of their progress. But, now he's up there, it's blinding, he can't find where he "started" anymore.

The interpretation of that line could end there. But, I don't believe it does - Adam seems to deny that he's able to see where he began, he seems to have lost all touch with his past, but someone else, perhaps someone more experienced in the clouds than him, well, "he says I am". And, perhaps, the mountain of effort it's taken to get Adam to this place has given him overconfidence in his own abilities - he thinks he "know[s]" he isn't near where they started, but the other person only "says". This could also be a comment on how that is true for all of our experiences. We are the only ones who know what it's like to be us, the others can merely say they know what it's like. But that's not to say that at any point, no one else knows what's best for us, that would be extremely egotistical. And here, Adam shows that he might not be as enlightened as the others who have made it there, "I don't wanna listen to what the world is gonna say". This line is then repeated later on, with the clarifying "when he grows up" appended. One could take this as dismissal of people on the ground for good reason, or mindless teenage egoism. I think that the remainder of this song, and the next song on the album can answer that for us.

He can keep growing, he can be "taller than the sky", no one can stop his growth because he's gotten so big, and because of his size, he can no longer interact with the world below him which he had ignored in favour of the sky. And perhaps, the world is more interesting than the featureless sky, as in the sky, there is not much to do, even if you're travelling at supersonic speeds, it doesn't feel like much. But if, by contrast, you're waling down a busy city street, it can feel like you're being whisked along at a hundred miles an hour, colours, sights and sounds to greet you every step of the way. Yes, down there is where the "whole lot of rarities" resides, not up in the sky. Absolute freedom is useful for a while, but, like Tetsuo, if we do not remain grounded, then we cannot get anything out of it. Another analogy for this might be philosophical questions - if they're abstract, floating, they're not necessarily not useful. They can be used to improve lives, to help others - but by themselves, they are just hypotheticals in the ether - and what good is an un-enacted idea?

#### It's a lot. It's seamless.

The pace of the album begins to shift into its highest gear here, we go from childhood innocence to teenage freedom in the previous nine songs, but this one takes us "towards a great descent" - he feels that his life is speeding up, but he somehow "miss[es] all the movement". How could this be? Well, if we look back to earlier, when I stated my belief that moving quickly in the sky doesn't feel like moving at all, then we see why this is the case. And if he's "running" towards his eventual demise, then why is he still idolising the idea of "movement"? As he reveals, he's not even moving despite the fact he's running, which could be interpreted as the entire scenario being a dream, passing by in the flash of an eye before he wakes up once more in his treefort bed.

Perhaps, he really did enjoy those halcyon days of childhood innocence, and after a long life spent travelling the world, looking down, having a life experience that might make someone say "It's a lot", he realises that maybe the people who seemed to exploit and restrict him as a child were just protecting him from those horrors. And, as he fades away, he wishes for drastic movement, he doesn't wish to drive on highways, but "run" and "rot" on them, perhaps he has been above them for so long that he has forgotten their purposes, their original uses faded beneath the clouds. More of this hazy imagery is used in "the air acts like pillows" - a typical feeling when one is in a dream and trying to run, perhaps signifying that Adam feels as if he is in some sort of nightmare already and further confirms this theory by saying "Rot on highways like teenagers with nightmares."

This line sums up the entire album in an instant - his nightmares are not necessarily actual nightmares, but his selfdamaging thoughts, his over-analytic side, and all of those have caused him to idealise running away from home. The thing is, going away from his home is hard, to get to somewhere bigger would require dozens of miles of running, often along inhospitable roads like highways. And thus, he realises there are many who want to run away but get trapped in that perpetual state of limbo. To complement this, the music is slow again, the chugging tempo of the earlier section of the song slows to a dreamy halt. Those people who ran on highways wanted to be in the "spotlight", either by having friends and attention, or fame and fortune. And those who don't make it line the highways, having tried to get there and failed.

The one thing Adam seems to want above anything else is material to grow off of, and often, they are juxtaposed against one another. The "books" and the "scene" are compared, much like the "substance" compared to the teenage exploitation of the "filming". This substance can come from anything, friends, lovers, films, books, music, but this substance is measured in only one thing - feelings. Which, as Adam tells us, he knows that he's going to "feel all these feelings, so many many feelings". Which, I suppose, is all we can to.

#### Conclusion

The Brave Little Abacus rules, Adam *is* right that this album is very sad, and, my goodness, this is now not only my favourite album of all time, but this is my favourite album of all time without question. I've also just noticed that I've spent this entire review of the album focusing on the lyrics. This is, in part, due to my lack of musical knowledge, listening to me trying to pick apart the chords and harmonies of this work would be dire. Do I need to state anything else other than "It sounds very good!"? Need I scour the band's history and ask them for their presumably innumerable and hard-to-remember inspirations? I don't think so. But that's something for the future.

Hopefully, one day, I will find (or make!) another album that gets somewhere close to this one in terms of sheer beauty. I almost don't want to. For me, in the south of England, there are few pine trees near to chant encouraging advice. But, this album has taught me, what use is there in sitting alone at home? What use is there to stagnation, the pretending nothing's changing? And what hope is there facing the world alone, or thinking you can fly? None. So find beauty in the things you love, dance with your friends, and have *concern in so many things you forget where you are*.

# thanks for read ing

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