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THE SAD DADS OF THE NATIONAL

For two decades, the band has written music about the kind of sadness that feels quotidian and incremental—the slow accumulation of ordinary losses.

By Amanda Petrusich

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In 2022, the band almost broke up. Instead, it emerged with a beautiful album. Photograph by Sophie Barbasch for The New Yorker

Last fall, the National débuted a new piece of merchandise: a black zippered sweatshirt featuring the words "SAD DADS" in block letters. The band—which formed in 1999, in Brooklyn—was lampooning its reputation as a font of midlife ennui, the sort of rudderless melancholy that takes hold when a person realizes that the dusty hallmarks of American happiness (marriage, children, a job in an office) aren't a guarantee against despair. For more than two decades, this has been the National's grist: not the major devastations but the strange little ache that feels like a precondition to being human. No amount of Transcendental Meditation, Pilates, turmeric, rose quartz, direct sunlight, jogging, oat milk, sleep hygiene, or psychoanalysis can fully alleviate that ambient sadness. Part of it is surely existential—our lives are temporary and inscrutable; death is compulsory and forever—but another part feels more quotidian and incremental, the slow accumulation of ordinary losses. Maybe there's a person you once loved but lost touch with. A friend who moved to a new town. An apple tree that stood outside your bedroom window, levelled to make way for broadband cable. An old dog. A former colleague. We are always losing, or leaving, or being left, in ways both minor and vast. "The grief it gets me, the weird goodbyes," Matt Berninger, the band's vocalist, sings on "Weird Goodbyes," a recent song featuring Justin Vernon, of Bon Iver. Berninger steels himself to confront the next loss: "Memorize the bathwater, memorize the air / There'll come a time I'll wanna know I was here."

This month, the National will release its ninth album, "First Two Pages

of Frankenstein." Like each of the band's previous records, it contains pathos and beauty. The National is made up of two sets of brothers—the multi-instrumentalists Aaron and Bryce Dessner, who are twins, and Scott and Bryan Devendorf, on bass and drums, respectively—along with Berninger, whose own brother, the filmmaker Tom Berninger, has become the group's default documentarian. (In 2013, Tom released a poignant feature, "Mistaken for Strangers," about his time on tour with the band; it opened the Tribeca Film Festival that year, with an introduction by Robert De Niro.) The group coalesced in a large, unheated industrial space on the oily banks of Brooklyn's Gowanus Canal, but its members were brought up around Cincinnati, and have known one another since they were young. Aaron, Bryce, and Bryan began making music together as teen-agers. "We'd set up and basically play instrumental versions of the Grateful Dead," Bryan told me. "It was, like, 'Eyes of the World' for half an hour." Berninger and Scott, who are a few years older, met in the University of Cincinnati's graphic-design program. Eventually, Scott, Bryan, Aaron, and Berninger moved to New York City and found desk jobs in design and publishing, while Bryce enrolled in the graduate program at the Yale School of Music. They began playing together at Berninger's loft, on Third and Bond Streets, then a dicey, barren corner of Brooklyn. "There was a pack of dogs that was always around," Bryan said. "People would abandon cars and burn them on the street." Scott and Berninger chose the band's name mostly for its meaninglessness. "We were trying to name it nothing," Scott said, laughing. A thread of Midwestern humility—a kind of gentle self-abnegation—still runs through the National's work.

In post-9/11 New York, bands with an assured sense of style (the Strokes, Interpol, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs) were being heralded as the second coming of downtown rock and roll. The National's presence was more studious. The band members dressed as though they were fluent in Adobe Illustrator. In "Meet Me in the Bathroom," Lizzy Goodman's chronicle of the era, Berninger tells a story about how Julian Casablancas, the Strokes' seductively disaffected singer, nearly stole his date with a single glance. "We were watching these cool bands that were way better than us at the Mercury Lounge, and, literally, people were throwing undergarments," Bryan recalled. "We were so awkward." For a long time, the National felt like a secret shared among friends. But gradually Berninger—tall, slender, bearded—developed into a magnetic front man. Onstage, his vibe was gloomy, but also vaguely debauched. He told me, "We were already in love with the songs that we were writing. We just wanted to have other people hear them." By 2007, when the band released "Boxer," its fourth LP, it was selling out multi-night stints at the Bowery Ballroom. The following August, Barack Obama put out a campaign video featuring an instrumental version of "Fake Empire," the album's dynamic, urging opening track.

The band members are now all in their late forties to early fifties. Their songwriting process starts with melodic sketches by the Dessners; Berninger writes the lyrics, with critical input from his wife, Carin Besser, who edited fiction at *The New Yorker* from 1999 to 2009. In the past decade and a half, the band has found unexpected purchase on the *Billboard* charts, with its last four records débuting in the top five. More recently, Aaron has become a sought-after pop producer, collaborating with Taylor Swift on her blockbuster albums "folklore," "evermore," and a deluxe version of "Midnights," and writing with Gracie Abrams, Girl in Red, and Ed Sheeran. Yet it's Berninger's voice, a lonesome baritone

in Red, and Ed Sheeran. Yet it's Berninger's voice, a lonesome baritone, that defines the band's sound. His lyrics often involve water (swimming pools, the sea, a forty-five-minute shower) and tend to express a sense of fitful alienation. On "Mistaken for Strangers," from 2007, Berninger sings of feeling unknowable and estranged, disillusioned by what he calls the "unmagnificent lives of adults":

> You get mistaken for strangers by your own friends
> When you pass them at night
> Under the silvery, silvery Citibank lights.

The feeling Berninger is describing here—the feeling that, to some extent, he is always describing—is a soft, amorphous grief. He recognizes it everywhere. "I live in a city sorrow built / It's in my honey, it's in my milk," he sings on "Sorrow," a track from "High Violet" (2010). Much like his songwriting heroes Leonard Cohen, Nick Cave, and Tom Waits, Berninger understands that true misery can also be kind of funny. In collaboration with the artist Ragnar Kjartansson, the National once performed "Sorrow" for six consecutive hours, or approximately a hundred and eight times, at MOMA PS1, in Queens; the band later released the performance on nine clear vinyl records, titling the set "A Lot of Sorrow." Berninger also knows how to write a sly, lusty quatrain—on "Karen," from 2005, he sings, "It's a common fetish / For a doting man / To ballerina on the coffee table / Cock in hand"—though the National lyric that makes me laugh the most is hardly a joke at all. "It's a Hollywood summer," Berninger sings on "Conversation 16," a sombre, whirling track from "High Violet." "You'd never believe the shitty thoughts I think."

"Matt is very childlike in a way that I love, and yet so mature and transcendent," the singer Phoebe Bridgers told me recently. Bridgers sings on two tracks on the band's new album. In early 2020, she and Berninger performed a duet called "Walking on a String" at Carnegie Hall. Before the show, Bridgers was talking with the musician Conor Oberst, who fronts Bright Eyes. "Conor asked me, 'Do you think I'm a stunted youth?' And I was, like, 'Well, absolutely, but I don't think that's necessarily bad,' " Bridgers said. Then she walked backstage, and found that Berninger had taken a friend's beard and draped it over his own lip, so that it looked like he had a mustache. "At Carnegie Hall," she added. "In a suit."

In 2014, Berninger and Besser moved to Los Angeles with their four-year-old daughter, Isla, and bought a bungalow in Venice, not far from the ocean. Tom came along, too, and started working out of a guesthouse in the back yard. The three of them were developing a television series based loosely on Tom's film about the National, but fictionalized. "The pitch was a show not unlike 'The Monkees,' but more modern," Berninger said. "A real, honest look at the music industry." Berninger put together a band and called it Das Apes. He wrote new songs, some of which ended up on his first solo record, "Serpentine Prison" (2020). They filmed a pilot, scouted locations, took meetings with HBO. In the end, they spent nearly a decade working on the show. "It was this endless circle of excitement and failure, excitement and failure," Tom told me. Berninger said, "We were sober about the chances of actually getting a TV show. But it felt like we got pretty close."

Finally, in the spring of 2021, they gave up. "There was real, genuine heartbreak," Berninger said. "A lot of it was connected to my brother. I

felt responsible for pulling him along on a long climb toward something that wasn't going to work out." Berninger also felt relief. "I went through a phase where I hibernated," he said. "I was working on a lot of National songs. But then I slowed down. Then I froze." The pandemic had halted the live-music industry (in the spring and summer of 2020, the National cancelled an entire thirty-nine-date tour), and it seemed like a good time for the band to start working on a new record. Bryce and Aaron were sending ideas. Berninger was stalling. "For six months or so, I was, like, 'Yeah, it's going great! Slow cookin', everything's awesome, going great,' " Berninger said. "But, in reality, nothing. Nothing at all. I couldn't do it at all. I went into a kind of panic." At first, he thought it was a run-of-the-mill writer's block. "Then I thought, O.K., this is a depression," he said. "You'll just deal with it like a flu. I tried a lot of things. Therapy, some antidepressants, exercise. I got totally sober. But that didn't help, either." For close to a year, Berninger couldn't write or sing. "My voice didn't work," he said. "I've never been a trained singer, but this was like I had no air."

In some ways, Berninger's paralysis felt inevitable. "He was never a natural performer," Aaron said. "None of us were—none of us *are*, really. But he had to bear the brunt of that. He's not hiding behind an instrument. I think sometimes we underestimated what that must have felt like, or what it did to him." When I asked Besser if she felt that the depression was causing the block, or that the block was causing the depression, she thought about it for a moment. "The body got taken down," she said. "It very much looked like something physical came and was hovering for a while. It was such a physical illness. But he had already been dealing with anxiety, with panic, so it did feel . . . not inevitable, maybe, but it was part of a longer process." Berninger is hesitant to gripe about the psychic perils of his work, which, from afar, can sound like perks—the adulation of a heaving crowd, travel, celebrity fans, cool suits—but, after two decades, he was spent. "I'd been in a manic phase for a long time," he said. "I could never totally wind down."

In April, 2022, the National gathered at Long Pond, Aaron's studio outside Hudson, New York, with the hope of finally recording new songs. The band's songwriting process has always been marked by brotherly tension and perfectionism. "People throw punches that usually don't hurt, but you occasionally catch one that's not so nice," Bryce told me. But this time it felt like more was at stake. Berninger wasn't doing well. "He hit a really real, very dark, very bleak spot," Tom said. Berninger said that he was "close to nonverbal" during this phase: "The guys were watching the World Cup—I was watching a ball bounce around. I couldn't be interested in anything." Performing was excruciating. He recalled, "I was able to sort of mumble and free-associate some things, and Aaron would try to encourage me—'That's great! Let's make a song out of it!' And I would say, 'There's no song there.' " At one point, Tom urged his brother to think of his pain as creative fodder. "I said, 'Matt, use this feeling and write about it,' " Tom told me. "He just looks at me with, like, anger in his eyes. 'What do you think I've been fucking doing for the past twenty years? All I've been writing about is depression.' "

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Auntie: The Perils of a Group Text with Twentysomethings

For a moment, it seemed as though the National might break up. Eight albums, world tours, twenty-odd years together—it had been a good run. "It's never lost on me that I get to be a wizard of the black magic that's music," Berninger told me. "I get to make these spells that make people cry, that make me cry. But to suddenly feel like that weird gift you had that enabled you to put little bits of words together and put them to a melody, or whatever songwriting is, this thing that you've built a whole life out of . . ." He paused. "The sparkles weren't coming from my fingertips." The focus of the Long Pond sessions shifted. Bryce told me, "I definitely thought it was ending. It wasn't about pushing Matt to finish this record so we could get back on tour and earn some money. I was actually surprised to find out how much I love him. I always have."

The band still had a four-month summer tour scheduled, beginning that May. "I had to pull it together," Berninger said. "The first three shows, I could barely look at the audience. Making eye contact with people is always dangerous for me, especially in the middle of a song. My brain disconnects and misfires. That's usually why I keep my eyes closed." During guitar solos, he'd be grateful for the chance to turn around and stare at the floor. "I'd be, like, 'O.K., there's about a minute more of this song, and then six more songs after that, and then we'll do the encore—just get through it.' I hated myself for that. I hated myself for taking those moments for granted. Who gets to have that moment? And you were inside your head the whole two hours, torturing yourself?"

Yet, as the tour went on, Berninger started to feel a little freer, more awake. "It was still a pretty slow, slow buck," he said. "I wasn't suddenly, like, 'Oh, good, I'm back.' Being with the band was a major part of getting me through it. But, mostly, I think it was time." The first thing he managed to write was "Once Upon a Poolside," which opens the new album. As in many of Berninger's songs, he worries about the future. "I love songs that look over the edge and describe the fall," he said. "Fear of my marriage falling apart is my worst fear ever. The band falling apart is my second biggest." The first verse is a tense evocation:

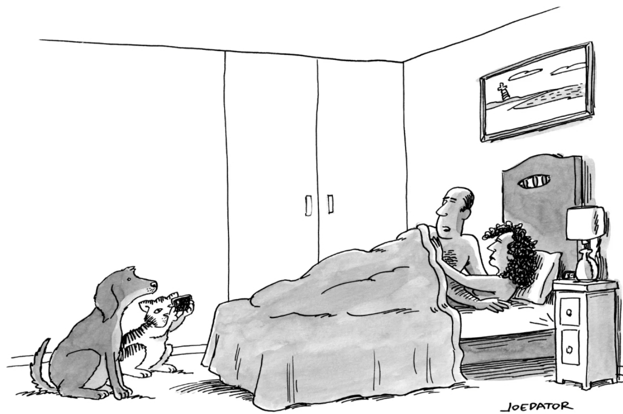
> Don't make this any harder
> Everybody's waiting
> Walk-on's almost over
> Teenagers on ice.

One day, Berninger pulled a copy of "Frankenstein" from his bookshelf, hoping that Mary Shelley's language might untangle something in him. "I started looking for words," he said. "I'll do that when I write—just any words. 'Tranquilize' popped up: 'tranquilized oceans,' 'poles.' " That

any words. "Tranquilize" popped up: "tranquilized oceans," "poles." That led Berninger to write "Your Mind Is Not Your Friend," which contains a haunting verse that drew, in part, from the first two pages of "Frankenstein":

> Tranquilize the ocean
> Between the poles
> You're crawling under rocks
> And climbing into holes.

"I tricked myself into writing about my depression, because the album was couched in this cool title, this other character, this unlovable creature," Berninger said. "There are no actual 'Frankenstein' references on the record. But I thought, That's a good little mask, a costume I can get into." Eventually, Berninger had enough material for a new record. Then he had more than enough. "He showed up," Aaron said. "Really present, and also really quiet, like the storm had passed and he was waking up from it. And then he became prolific." He added, "To hear a great National album come out of that was so gratifying. Like, Oh, we didn't just wreck on the road."



"I don't think I'm comfortable with the dog watching us and the cat filming us."

Cartoon by Joe Dator

When Berninger and I first started talking, he was still a little uneasy with the terminology: writer's block, mental illness, a funk, a bummer, a really bad time, his "year of thinking darkly." One afternoon, we walked around Kingston, New York, looking for a spot to get a drink. In conversation, Berninger is open and self-effacing. He jokingly suggested that perhaps it was still possible to tell everyone that the word "depression"—which pops up in some of the press materials for the album—was a typo. "What actually happened is that I fell into a deep *diarrhea*," he said, taking a drag from an American Spirit.

This past March, the band gathered at Long Pond to rehearse for an appearance on the "Tonight Show" and for an intimate gig at the Bearsville Theatre, a small venue in the Catskills. I added my boots to a mound of muddied shoes at the studio door. In late winter, the Hudson River Valley is grim terrain—filthy snowbanks, spindly trees, deep puddles—yet it somehow felt true to the National's gestalt to launch an album during the bleakest time of year. The feeling inside

was homey: bowls of almonds, cans of seltzer, fresh macaroons from a bakery in Hudson. Someone was brewing coffee in a moka pot. A picture window in the back of the studio looked out on a meadow scattered with Adirondack chairs. "It isn't wall-to-wall recording equipment or guitars," Jonathan Low, one of the band's engineers, told me. "When you first walk in, you're immediately drawn to the connection to the outdoors."

Two of Aaron's young children, Mimi and Robin, darted around. Bryan, wearing sunglasses and chewing on a toothpick, settled into the drum room, which was sectioned off by sheets of soundproof glass. "It's like I'm in an aquarium!" he said to Robin, who giggled. Bryan's drumming —studied, precise, but still deeply human—is central to the National's uneasy sound. (In an interview with *Modern Drummer*, Scott once described his brother's style as "machine organic.") During rehearsal, the band members communicate with a clipped, knowing rapport. They ran through "Tropic Morning News," a new song about passively consuming an endlessly regenerating stream of bad news on one's phone. It contains hints of foreboding. "I was suffering more than I let on," Berninger sang. His voice sounded almost cheerful.

The next day, backstage at the "Tonight Show," the band was relaxed. ("It's embarrassing, but you can always ask to do it again," Aaron said.) Berninger sometimes speaks or shouts a lyric rather than singing it, and, while rehearsing on set, he chanted through a couplet toward the end of "Tropic Morning News," holding up a finger as if scolding someone for speaking out of turn: "I would love to have nothing to do with it / I would like to move on and be through with it." Berninger's phrasing is idiosyncratic; it's rare that he does what you think he's going to do. "Matt basically never sings the implied melody," Aaron said. Their performance that night was elegant and jittery.

The following morning, the band arrived in Bearsville for the show. Tom was gliding around setting up cameras. During the sound check, when it came time for "Send for Me," the final track on "First Two Pages of Frankenstein," Bryce listened from the floor. At the end of the song, Benjamin Lanz and Kyle Resnick, multi-instrumentalists who tour with the band, played a loose, cascading outro on trombone and trumpet. "It's like an Italian funeral," Bryce said approvingly. "Send for Me" might be Berninger's most plainly earnest song. It is a promise of eternal solidarity, an offer to help someone through all the awkward and devastating moments that constitute a life. When Berninger wrote it, he was thinking of his daughter, but it also feels like an offer to the band's fans. When you are feeling overpowered by melancholy, put your headphones on:

> If you're ever in a gift shop dying inside
> Filling up with tears
> Cause you thought of somebody you loved
> You haven't seen in years
> Send for me whenever, wherever
> Send for me, I'll come and get you.

In the past, Berninger has been known to drink an entire bottle of wine onstage, but lately he is taking more nights off from alcohol. Backstage, he declined when offered tequila. He said, of performing, "I think I enjoy it more when I'm a little bit drunk. But it's good to just let the music itself be enough." Upstairs, fans were filing in. Tickets were hard to come by (these days, the National is far more likely to play a sold-out

arena than a five-hundred-capacity theatre in the mountains), and most of them had gone to friends, family, and members of the band's fan club. "People don't talk during our shows," he said. "People get shushed. There's nobody in the back screaming for Jack-and-Cokes." The audience tends to fixate on Berninger, with an intensity that can resemble obeisance, or even ecstasy. National shows are hushed, until the moment when they feel like a bloodletting. The band frequently encores with "Mr. November," a song from "Alligator" (2005). It features a feral chorus. "I won't fuck us over, I'm Mr. November!" Berninger screams, crawling through the crowd on the floor, fans pawing at his back, everyone looking deranged.

Though the National is often thought of as a magnet for fortysomething dudes in cool sneakers and Warby Parkers—sad dads—there were at least as many young women at the Bearsville show. When I asked Phoebe Bridgers about the band's reputation for giving voice to a certain strain of middle-aged male angst, she said, "Something middle-aged men and teen-age girls have in common is the act of finding yourself, and being kind of self-conscious. Maybe some beliefs that you've held on to for a long time are finally being shed. The teen-age girl in me is obsessed with the National, and feels very spoken to and seen by them, maybe for the exact same reasons that they speak to middle-aged men."

The National has a handful of songs—"Squalor Victoria," "Sea of Love"—that come alive onstage. "Eucalyptus," a new single, feels bigger and more forceful in concert. The lyrics address the material fallout of a breakup; Berninger frets about the future of a couple's shared possessions while periodically interjecting the sorts of forlorn questions ("What if we moved back to New York?") we tend to ask when we're clinging to something that's slipping farther out of reach. It is an archetypal National song, full of despondency and hyperspecific life-style references. In the aftermath of a breakup, how do you reckon with the ceiling fans, the undeveloped film, the houseplants, the records? "What about the Mountain Valley Spring? / What about the ornaments? / What if I reinvented again? / What about the moondrop light?" Berninger wonders. In Bearsville, he became animated by anguish during the chorus: "I don't care / I don't want it / It wouldn't be fair / It'd be so alone, without you there." Then he turned a lyric that, on paper, feels meek and defeated into a punch line: "If I miss it, I'll visit!" From the audience, I felt whatever it is a person feels during a National show: happy, sad, weird, alone, cradled, there.

Ten years ago, Bryce bought a small, circa-1842 farmhouse in upstate New York. When I visited, early on a Sunday morning, the musician Sufjan Stevens was sitting in the kitchen, getting ready to walk his dog. "I took some incense," he called back as he left. Stevens and Bryce are close; in 2019, Stevens built a studio nearby, and he now lives in the Catskills full time. They met in Kensington, Brooklyn, in the early two-thousands. Stevens was a fan of Bryce's avant-garde quartet, Clogs, and didn't know that Bryce was also in a rock band. "When he told me, I was, like, Ugh, that's not my flavor," Stevens said, laughing. "But over the years I've come to love and admire and marvel at it. At the center, lyrically, is this really dark world of trauma and confusion and self-loathing." That world, Stevens said, is distinguished by Berninger's specificity: "He's writing about a conflict in the moment, as it's happening, and names and items and objects and places are being

dropped. It's almost like a regional drama that takes place in his head."

Earlier in the day, Stevens and Bryce had FaceTimed with the Dessners' older sister, Jessica, who lives in Italy and is undergoing treatment for breast cancer. Distance was in the air. These days, each member of the National has settled in a different place. Bryan moved back to Cincinnati. Scott went to Long Island; Aaron is upstate. Berninger and Besser are in the midst of moving back East, to Connecticut. Bryce has lived mostly in France since 2016. (His wife, the singer Pauline de Lassus Saint-Geniès, was born in Paris; they have a young son, Octave.) "Maybe that's a theme of what's been going on in my life in general," Bryce said, handing me a mug of coffee. "Letting go of the past and being with each other where we are now. We all lived in Brooklyn together, we were always together. It was kind of a dream. Then, suddenly, we were just spread to the wind. We're not in each other's lives in the same way that we used to be."

Lately, with the band more dispersed, side projects have picked up. Outside of the National, Bryce is a celebrated composer, having collaborated with Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Ryuichi Sakamoto. In 2015, he wrote a portion of the Golden Globe-nominated score for Alejandro González Iñárritu's "The Revenant." Iñárritu is also a fan of the National. "They do it without trying too hard," he told me. "As with humidity, there is a moment when you are really wet without noticing." In 2019, Bryce composed an anxious, probing piece called "Impermanence" for the Australian String Quartet and the Sydney Dance Company. "It's about the fragility of life," he said. "The things we think are always going to be there. I've always held people really closely. I think my brother does, too. It's partly a twin thing. I remember I used to cry myself to sleep thinking about the day that he would die." That insistence on magnifying the humanity of an experience is perhaps what unites the National's discography, even at its most conceptual. "There's a heartbeat in there," Bryce said.

Though it is easy to find the emotional content in Berninger's lyrics, there is a softer current of mournfulness in the Dessners' melodies, rhythms, and structures. "I'm glad you hear that," Aaron told me. "I learned to make music when I was a teen-ager, grappling with anxiety and depression. That's common in teen-agers, but for me at the time it felt really severe—it was like getting hit by a truck." He paused. "Someone once asked me, To what degree does the work contain your emotions? And I guess it's a hundred per cent." Low, the engineer, told me, "There are times when we're at the mastering stage and half of the elements in a song get muted or a completely different version ends up on the album. Aaron has really honed his instincts to maximize the emotional message of the song." This past winter, Aaron began writing and producing for Ed Sheeran's upcoming sixth album, "-" (pronounced "subtract"). Sheeran described the record as a document of his spiral through fear, depression, and anxiety. "Writing with Aaron, I found myself having lines drawn out of me by the music," he said. "I barely thought about them—they just happened."

Aaron's capacity to infuse his melodies with feeling is what led to his first collaboration with Taylor Swift, who texted him in the spring of 2020 to ask if he wanted to try writing together. Swift was a fan of the National—"Taylor can sing any National song word for word, pretty much," Aaron said—and sensed something narrative in Aaron's production. "She felt like it was telling her things—she was hearing

stories in it," he said. "That was how we clicked." She asked if he would share some of his unreleased instrumental work. "I had a folder of stuff that I had been working on, because I was going to open for Bon Iver by myself in Europe in the spring of 2020, which of course got cancelled. So I just sent her the folder. And at 2 A.M. that night she sang 'Cardigan' "—a still, contemplative song she eventually included on "folklore." "It felt like a lightning bolt hit the house."

I asked Berninger if watching Aaron's first album with Swift dominate the charts (and win a Grammy for Album of the Year) had been in any way disorienting. From the outside, at least, the timing looked nearly cruel—coinciding, as it did, with Berninger's depression. He told me, "When I wasn't writing, I was just glad that Aaron was keeping us in the Zeitgeist." Swift sings on "The Alcott," a plaintive ballad on "First Two Pages of Frankenstein." She and Berninger trade lines on the chorus, a wary couple trying to figure out whether they made a mistake by ending things. The woman in the song—who sits in a bar, writing in a notebook—is based on Besser. "Taylor inhabited that character," Berninger said. "She's always been really interested in how Carin and I write together." Swift has collaborated on songs with her former partner, the actor Joe Alwyn, and asked Berninger and Besser what the experience was like for them. The advice they often give is to be careful but to stay true: the disaffection and self-loathing and pettiness—it all has to be in there.

"My love for the National stems from the lyricism and the soundscapes the band creates to perfectly compliment them," Swift told me recently. "There are so many lines in their songs that are disturbingly, courageously truthful. I'll always marvel at how their lyrics have the ability to express such stark darkness and wistful romanticism at the same time. There's also such a synergy to the deadpan spoken-word quality of Matt's vocals and the vistas the band is creating around him. That entire verse in 'I Need My Girl' where he's talking about her losing her shit, driving the car into the garden and then apologizing to the vines. It really sums up what sets them apart. They set an entire scene."

It feels worth saying that during the time I spent with the National I was sad. I had recently and suddenly become a young widow, and I was raising a small child alone. I'd always responded to the band's nervous articulations of heartbreak and yearning, but now they felt heavier, truer, and more comforting. Sadness can sometimes feel like an aesthetic choice, fodder for memes and T-shirts that say things like "Too Bad So Sad" or "Just Another Worst Day of My Life." Compounding pessimism can feel like the only way to express compassion, especially online. That's not the kind of sad I was. The National's music speaks to a more intimate, nonperformative sorrow. "There's so much wreckage in life," Aaron told me. "The band has lost different people. At times, we've lost each other."

In the end, Berninger found that the only thing that helped his depression was patience. There were moments when he wondered if he should keep at it—if art even meant anything, if it could ever make anyone feel better. "If I'm here now feeling this, I don't know if it's done me any good," he remembered thinking. "I feel disconnected from all my friends, I feel disconnected from everything, I don't feel like I've learned anything, I don't feel like I'm necessarily a kinder, wiser person. Maybe the constant self-reflection, the trying to make something

Maybe the constant self-reflection, the trying to make something beautiful out of all the fear and the desire and the love, maybe if I hadn't always been making so much of it then I wouldn't be sucked down into it. Maybe I've created this weird person that I am." Yet spend a few minutes in the crowd at a National show and it becomes obvious that the band's music can bring about a kind of catharsis. It opens up space for mourning—both the big losses and the tiny, mundane, endless ones.

"First Two Pages of Frankenstein" feels like a distillation of the National's ethos. Aaron points to "New Order T-Shirt," a song about trying to hold on to the past yet somehow transcend it. "The whole DNA of the National is contained there," he said. "That idea—'I keep what I can of you / Split second glimpses and snapshots and sounds . . . I carry you around like drugs in my pocket'—is exactly how I feel about the grief of life. The way you can connect deeply with people. But you can't always hold on." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the familial relationship of the Dessner brothers.

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NEW YORKER FAVORITES

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Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records."

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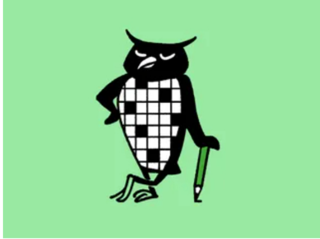


CROSSWORD

THE CROSSWORD: THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2023

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

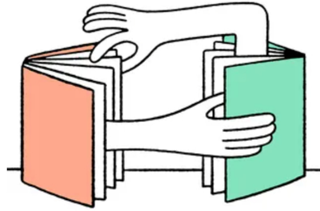
By Patrick Berry

NAME DROP

NAME DROP: THURSDAY, APRIL 20, 2023

Can you guess the notable person in six clues or fewer?

By Will Nediger



UNDER REVIEW

THE BEST BOOKS WE'VE READ IN 2023 SO FAR

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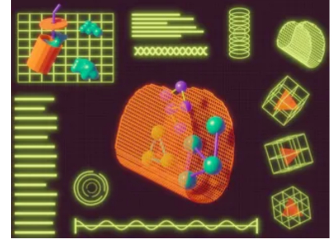
By The New Yorker



ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

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