

## VINYL

*I told you about strawberry fields  
You know, the place where nothing is real  
Well, here's another place you can go  
Where everything flows  
Looking through the bent-backed tulips  
To see how the other half lives  
Looking through a glass onion*

## GLASS ONION, The White Album

Albert Goldbarth's *Delft* opens with six inconclusive words that introduce, with both cogent detail and diction, a sexual conquest of Anton van Leeuwenhoek's and his ample wife.

*He cometh unto his kingdom now.*

Being an admirer of Goldbarth's, I keep these words tucked conveniently under my tongue, waiting to be rummaged for. This is because I will always choose to see The Man under their guidance: clad in his raggedy boxers with their baconed garters, walking every morning to the Numark turntable he purchased from Bangkal as he would admire each black and shiny round that spanned his colony of vinyl. This is how he dwells in my mind, walking with such power and territoriality - as if he, so

diminutive in size and heedless of his value, had an entire kingdom at his command and disposal. I now find that I, perhaps, was not too far off from the truth.

He would flip leisurely through the flat cardboard pockets with their now-almost-translucent prints and pull an arbitrary one from the vertical stack (for, as he had reminded me so frequently, horizontally piling records would melt them together come summertime). He would carefully lift the turntable's needle, and upon resting it on the outer rim of the spinning record, gently allow the mellifluousness of the music embalm him. With eyes closed and a hand poised on his stomach, he would beckon me to him and clumsily waltz with me across our parquet. I remember each dance being as amusing as the firsts of its kind (dating back to when my bottom was still wrapped in a *lampin*), and how he, too, always seemed to be hearing a particular song for the blissful first time.

And as Leeuwenhoek so regally cometh unto his kingdom and pumice the bosom of Cornelia *nee* Swalmius, claiming her every lilt and precipice, this man does, too; this sprightly pygmy with his glassy *sago*-like eyes and disarmingly un-present sense of presence, cometh unto his kingdom and claim the black records with enough glassiness to entreat that of his eyes.

*We were talking about the space between us all*

*And the people who hide themselves behind a wall of illusion*

*And life flows on within you and without you*

## WITHIN YOU WITHOUT YOU, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

This kingdom of his was, in truth, trifling. I remember one such occasion when he was perched on his majestic throne of laminated resin and silver-coated plastic feet, rummaging through an acquired trove of more modestly sized old records than he was used to (these being 45s). Cramped around him was the wasteland of our family's dismissible possessions.

I peered at his shirtless self through the grooves of our garage screen door as he observed a particularly unremarkable black disc, read its printed center, closed his eyes for some moments, and tossed the said specimen into one of either a natty beige leather box, or a beige leather box *with* gnats.

I had been living with this man for sixteen years now, effortlessly eliciting such peculiar behavior from him that most of this world's quirks appeared to be bleached grayscale in comparison. To my mind he was a colony of the cyan, magenta, and yellow speckles that bled beside each other and constituted Technicolor images. Yet after sixteen years of coexistence, I still couldn't openly fawn over his affinity for the peculiar. His diffuseness simply wouldn't let me. He was not to be disturbed as he strolled the streets he had paved for no one in his head (which I'm fairly certain include Raon and Hidalgo, his repositories of self-discovery as a young man).

At that time I saw myself in him - solitude, indignation, petulance and all. It then became irresistible to imagine that I was part of him somehow, as if I had been reared a

spitting image of him. I was always trying to prove myself worthy of his appraisal, which I knew, even then, was actually negligible. But I lusted after it so feverishly. He was oblivious, of course, to these thoughts. He proceeded to clean out the cobwebbed boxes, one record after another. I decided to let him be, but was taken so much by the curiosity I beheld while watching him in his fool's stupor.

I walked carefully across his territory, observing a spiral of dust motes prancing in the three o'clock sunshine behind and around him. I enjoyed what warmth I could get from the sun dappling our gate as I watched the motes preen one another to outdance the rest. I looked over to him. He was still at it, sorting the old EPs pensively, smiling to himself once in a while and chuckling giddily whenever I presume he associated a fond memory with one of them.

Biding my time, I measured my following words carefully. Sixteen years had done the measurement for me: I knew each word had to be unambiguous if I wanted to be safe – though I knew full well that no statement was unambiguous enough for him and could, in fact, only ripple his currently tranquil surface. The statement also had to be made with convincing indifference, for somewhere along the way he had developed antibodies for sincerity, care, and an entire specter of human poignancy. As pitiful as it would sound, sixteen years had yet to break the ice scalding over the conversations of ours that were straddled by a goal to outdo each other. And on those rare occasions when we were finally on equal footing, he seemed to purposefully find reasons to trip me up.

'What are you doing?'

It was such a safe question this time, so untainted neither with contempt nor with ambiguity, that I felt the desire to applaud myself. Over the years I even found myself screening statements and questions for *political* correctness, when voicing concerns to a loved one had to be the most effortless thing. I remember wondering why answering a question, any at all, had to be the sorriest concern for him. Always it had been far too easy likening him to a nipple, turning swollen and turgid with the slightest frisk or skim of any texture. He attempted to justify his behavior – to legitimize its consequences towards those around him – by reminding us that he was an artist, as if that entitled one to be indiscriminately insensitive.

Now, let us not get ahead of his response: he answered without much thought (another characteristic flaw, perhaps, which he seemed to think a charm; he was so aloof) like letting his favorite *Tapa's pastillas* simmer idly on his tongue. He responded strangely, too, as he was wont to do: he said simply that he was saving the world, as if that were, again, simply like letting a sweet simmer idly on his tongue.

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The destitution and strain of his youth, beyond callusing his hands, eventually callused any sense of elitism (and with it sensitivity) accessible to him. This was so even in the face of his forthcoming success.

Of the odd jobs he had taken were selling the candied *kamote* and *kalamay* his mother would cook in the afternoon, and cleaning the then-festive jeepneys queued

along Tutuban for extra money. These allowed him a few pence to begin a humble record collection, of which whereabouts I remain speculative to this day. I never found out what happened during those empty stretches of time of which there were simply no stories to tell. Perhaps no one wanted to remember, or perhaps I was chasing answers where there were none. Perhaps – and I doubt this – there was just nothing else worth remembering. Nevertheless I am left only with my disjoint inferences, and after some time I conceded that I was never meant to know.

It was no surprise that at the cusp of his adolescence, he had willfully become an unreachable man with each time he stowed from home and supported his artistic career, balling and clenching his heart to stone and back again. From these stories – which are not mine to tell – I would eventually gather my own concept of strength and independence, though I still cannot sieve this as either fault or merit.

But this I learned from him, if any: when push comes to shove, you can trust only yourself in this life. And if being selfish is what'd get one through, then he knew it had to be done.

It wasn't so difficult to learn: heart to stone. Heart to stone, and back again.

*Where I belong, I'm right*

*Where I belong, silly people run around*

*They worry me and never ask me*

*Why they don't get past my door*

## **FIXING A HOLE, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band**

I'd like to believe he spent most of his life in mirrors. I suspect it was like looking at himself outside of himself, and as the two convex images finally converged he found only one: of these, the first was of himself combing the streets of Raon in the 1970s for a 45 he could afford (for long-playing records were painful financial setbacks to his meager *baon* then). On the other plane of the glass he found a mirror image of his litness and interests as a young man, thumbing through the prized record collections of Makati Cinema Square to this day. He retained his fondness for vinyl.

The difference between those two images (save for an incremental improvement height-wise, thankfully) was that he could finally afford every record he desired to complete his collection. And for this, he wanted (and is still building) the world – Simon and Garfunkel, Bread, Freddie Aguilar, The Carpenters, Carly Simon, Peter Paul and Mary, Springsteen, Queen, Barry Manilow, Michael Jackson, Gary Lewis, Bob James and Earl Klugh, music of Motown, Hall and Oates. Last Christmas we looped The Beatles' *Abbey Road*, *The Jackson Five Christmas Special*, and the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* musical score over Italian food and wine. On eventless days I would request for *The Beatles' Ballads* or Simon and Garfunkel until the records sounded a bit grainier than what was passable. Suffice it to say that listening to the scores of worlds away altogether altered my musical expectations thereafter.

I would often be reminded of my fortune for having an entire inheritance of old records and historical value at my disposal. While I currently spend a pretty penny on clothes, books, and transitory trinkets, at my age he was making ends meet as Lady Madonna had managed to do. He could do nothing but relinquish the opportunities to expand those interests that ultimately entailed spending, being bereft of the frills I enjoy at this age.

What he did have, though, was The Beatles. And that, to my mind, was having everything one would ever need.



The first record he purchased in the '70s was an EP from The Beatles' *Let It Be*, though the title of the song escapes him. As do I, he got by with their music - getting through the tremors of high school (then the imposition of martial law) and college life, of living separately from the family I knew he loved dearly, of braving the perfect storm he saw in the Philippine art scene, of chasing the ghosts of solitude he knew only emptiness in. He had a few fleeting loves, all of them as wildly passionate as could be expected from an artist, but he faded on them. He loved himself too much. For that, loving another was too unthinkable a compromise. A close second to his affections was, at the time, not a woman, but the music that skimmed his head without rest and stayed in it even after he had tucked away his brushes and rolls of film for the day.



This was his idea of saving the world: a spinning turntable, a couple of cleaned long-playing records, a high-fidelity diamond needle.

I don't believe it was ever a matter of saving the *past*, as I'd suggested to him that day when he had answered me vaguely in the garage. It was really the world he believed he was saving, if he was saving anything at all. The places he admired most were bound solely by their retrospective value: the geographic borders of Liverpool were not quite as meaningful as the fact that The Beatles had collaborated there; and so on, with the intricacies of his interest in the old. What he remembered of the north was not urban Subic, but Ilocos, with its luxuriant *capiz* panels (some of which he recently restored for our home), the crevices of its cobblestone streets, the click-clack of the now-stylized *kalesas*, the stuffy empanadas, and its fine white coasts. He was enamored with Bangkal in Makati, and not because the place somewhat echoed the disposition of his hometown in Tondo, but because he admired the rarity of the treasures in the thrift stores and the delicious dreariness of life's pace in the community.

It was not that he couldn't come to terms with the present, or that he was incapable of foregoing what had already been lost. It was simply that he never believed *anything* could be lost. Not a chance, no, if he only tried his darned best to save his world.

*My mother was of the sky*

*My father was of the earth*

*But I am of the universe*

*And you know what it's worth*

## **YER BLUES, The White Album**

Eventually I decided that my interest in vinyl records entailed learning how to operate a turntable without supervision. The Man obliged immediately, even elatedly, to demonstrate how I could play records without my ungainly hands damaging the audio set.

What followed still is, to my mind, a phantasm.

It was so linearly done that it I wouldn't be able to resist chronicling each step with as much scruple as he'd devoted. I watched as my father began by tinkering with the woofers and turntable controls. Pulling *Abbey Road* from a stack lined against the wall, he carefully slid the record out with his thumb on the rim and the rest of his fingers on the central label. He threw me a glance, wordlessly resting the record on the felt plate, punctuating the most challenging step of the process. He was estimating the spinning line that would catch the needle. This was my cue.

With a curt nod he invited me to try and hit the running line in question, thereby beginning the album. It felt like watching the spokes of a bicycle blur, waiting for that evasive line to materialize under my nose. Suffice it to say that when it finally did, my clumsiness dropped the needle on the rim *after* the intended one. Suffice it to say, also, that the first attempt – and the two more that followed and foiled – didn't even matter.

My father was apparently sated enough watching me take on his interests. He smiled, thoroughly entertained.

*'Subukan nga natin ulit.'* ('Let's give that another try.')

Within minutes we were at the old shindig again, dancing jerkily all over the place.

Well, *that* was the beezkneez, with two z's. It was probably more transcendental than the Dalai Lama and Queen's music combined, which is saying a lot. (I'm speaking here of the Bohemian Rhapsody. But you already knew that.)

Anyway.

It was a phantasm, as I'd never seen such gentleness from my father as when he handled his records and turntable. It was as if his callused hands could do nothing to perturb the glossy surfaces of records simply because he willed them not to. Though in the name of music it may be, seeing his spines retract once in a while was refreshing. He was fond of hopping from foot to foot with decisions, deciding ficklely on an entire spectrum of matters from real estate to lanai chairs, but being around his records trimmed his fire to a minimum. He knew which ones to play in seconds flat.

You'd be happy to know that he did succeed, after some time, in saving the world.

*I'm doing the best that I can*

*I've got to admit it's getting better*

*A little better all the time*

## **GETTING BETTER, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band**

Playing records, to my mind, is one of the few intersections – to quote Jeffrey McDaniel – of function and desire, from the crisp motion of sliding the record out of its pocket to its trademark intro of grainy static. Allow me to call it a rogue marriage – a seamless junction, really – of the arts and sciences.

There are estimations to be made in operating belt-drive turntables, yet every experience departs even at the slightest from others before and thereafter, rendering each unrepeatable. Some technicalities may be learned, sure; but ultimately it is the soul that propels one into rapture over the idea of owning the world in a flat vinyl disc.

Afraid of the unguarded sensitivity he'd probably mistake me as having, I'd never own up to this in front of him; but everything on life and relationships I had to learn, I did from my father's old records.

In handling them, one had to be scrupulous in tilting and adjusting the grip that the discs may not slip out of the hands as loved ones often do: looseness will drop and rigidity will crack. To place the needle on the most elusive, hair-thin line at the beginning of each album is a calculable decision that must be carefully premeditated and struck white-hot. (By this I mean to say, of course, that at the cusp of that moment you have every power to have it wax or wane.)

Prematurely dropping the needle from the first rim will get you nothing but grain; placing it too far ahead will begin the song abruptly, and may only frighten you into pulling away altogether. Being too pushy with the needle, finally, will gash the record's surface, leaving it unwilling to play any more songs for you.

You must let the sweetness of the forthcoming experience estimate your cosines while guiding the needle. In simpler words, you must let the moment *simmer*.

Yes, yes; perhaps I am dragging too spectacular a procedure out of making vinyl plates spin, but for this I decline to conclude anything for anyone: uncertainty, in truth, makes for the most delicious dissection of any circumstance, if only for the head-on collision of realization that waits.

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Now, let me tell you something about solitude.

Let me tell you about the yearning that follows once you decide that you are too good for the company of others, or that living disparate from the nurture of those who care will lend you a better sense of self. Let me tell you how many inches of my room's white walls have been ingrained in memory from all the staring after being pushed away repeatedly by the man I admired most. Allow me to remind you that the heart was made not of stone, but of a human component, for a reason.

Let me tell you how my father learned slowly, *getting by with a little help from his friends*, that there was enough room for two in his retrospective conquests. Let me tell

you how we found a livable present by looking to the past. Let me tell you how, even after the first wave of The Beatles' British invasion invaded *our* lives, the music of junctures past welded our temperaments together.

Let me tell you how I chose to excuse his contempt in favor of his company (which, as I'm sure I've reluctantly made apparent by now, weighed far more than the former) that day in the garage, and how this attitude was carried still onto future relationships. Let me tell you how, in the end, we managed to find one another in our respective solitudes, though grievances stay within the grieving even after they find someone with whom to share the load.

And let me tell you something, too, about learning and its circular nature; of how a record can run multiple tracks for multiple times without once wheezing. If I someday should desire to settle down and rear a family, I will remember to place a phonograph in my children's room, and impart wordlessly to them the eons of greatness I found in a kingdom long past as they drift to sleep.

*Once there was a way to get back homeward*

*Once there was a way to get back home*

*Sleep, pretty darling; do not cry*

*And I will sing a lullabye*

*Golden slumbers fill your eyes*

*Smiles awake when you rise*

*Sleep, pretty darling; do not cry*

*And I will sing a lullabye*

**GOLDEN SLUMBERS, Abbey Road**