

Of Dandelions and Progressive Rock

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Dandelion:

1. From French *dent-de-lion*, translation of medieval Latin *dens leonis* ‘lion’s tooth.’

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That it’s been twenty years since I got my first guitar is meaningless. Compared to the other musicians in the band, I can barely play. I never took lessons and I only know the chords to the songs I write myself. I don’t know what I’m doing. My execution is messy and loose. I never intended to be the singer in our band. I hesitate to call myself a musician, but I’m at a point where I’m okay with calling myself a writer. Over the last few years, writing has been the main focus for me. I’ve received some accolades and my first book is about to be published. As much as I wanted it to, this didn’t happen overnight. I suppose it could be the result of dedication. Ambition. What my guitarist would call practice.

Our household includes two stubborn females. The other is Dolla Dolla Bills, a rescue dog believed to be a former breeding bitch cast aside in old age. Her name started off as a joke, but it stuck. She also earned many nicknames. A three-year-old Japanese boy I know calls her Tanpopo Obachan — Dandelion Grandmother — for the way she gnaws the flower with her toothless maw, pulping it to swallow.

We call her Dolla for short. Since she was a stray, we’re not certain what breed she is. It’s clear she is at least part Pekingese or Shih tzu — some kind of lion dog of Chinese origin. She is the dog version of me. I’m also part Chinese, born in the year of the Dog according to the Chinese zodiac. Despite this, my parents believed I was a cat in my previous life due to the paw print-shaped birthmark on my hand (now gone) and my ability to land on all fours. Dolla is a dog with cat-like independence, a love of naps, and a feline way of pouncing on her toys. A tiny lioness.

Progressive Rock:

2. Also known as ‘prog rock’ or ‘prog.’ A subgenre of rock music developed in an attempt to provide greater artistic credibility to rock music. The ‘Big Six of Prog’ are Genesis, King Crimson, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Yes, and Emerson, Lake, & Palmer.

I listened to my first Emerson, Lake, & Palmer album when I was a teenager, at which point the first records of Van Halen and Boston were regulars on my turntable. After listening to *Brain Salad Surgery*, I can’t remember if I actually or only nearly threw up. Syncopated rhythms, revolutionary polyphonic Moog synthesizers, and plenty of harmonic dissonance—it was an unsettling force. I wasn’t sure I liked what I heard, but ELP introduced the infinite possibilities of music. I didn’t have to make music that would be played on the radio, or write songs that would make listeners comfortable. I could send them running for the bathroom.

Keith Emerson. In a metallic suit, he strums the stiff strings of a grand piano with his bare hands. In other songs he’s an acrobat, playing his organ backwards, jumping it like a hurdle. His playing is of such complexity he seems deranged. He mounts the machine with contemptuous thrusts of his hips. Nothing he’s doing with music is safe. He rocks at the edge of disaster, and I can’t look away. He’s fucking his instrument. He’s more than us. He’s a genius. And insanely good, but it all just boils down to practice...and lots of it.

I’m compelled to create, but not to refine. Despite the skills I have acquired on my own—the tricks I use to make something new—I may have reached a limit. An entrepreneur my whole life, I didn’t go to university. I never felt the need for a bachelor’s degree, but lately I have been intrigued by possibly studying for an MFA. I don’t want to attend lectures, do group projects, or take exams, but the workshop environment of a graduate studies program appeals. I can’t imagine a university would accept a degree-less writer like me, but I try my best and send off an application anyway.

I apply to the University of British Columbia, with fiction, poetry, and songwriting as my genres. If I’m accepted, I’ll want to be a better musician. It’s the first day of 2016, and I’m making only one resolution: to practice guitar. The song I’ll learn isn’t widely known to the non-prog community. None of my friends will recognize it: a ballad from *Brain Salad Surgery*: “Still... You Turn Me On.” I’ve decided to learn the version from ELP’s 1974 live California Jam

footage, although unlike Greg Lake in that performance, I'll sing the lyrics in the correct order. And unlike Greg Lake, I won't chew gum while singing and picking. I'm not that coordinated.

I break the song down to its component parts. I make myself familiar with the unconventional chord structures, then I memorize the lyrics. The exact fingerpicking can wait. By the end of this, perhaps I'd be able to call myself a guitarist. Maybe even a singer. Two days later, I'm surprised to see rapid improvement. My callouses have toughened and my fingers now have the muscle memory of the chord shapes. I am encouraged.

Then I plateau.

But I stick with it. I rehearse the song every single day for weeks.

I receive an email from UBC. The faculty is recommending me for admission into the MFA in Creative Writing program. Because I don't have a bachelor's degree, I am not yet accepted. But I might be. My case will be taken to the dean for consideration.

I'm still unsure if I want to go to university. I fear that I may lose my street cred, that I'll conform to the unadventurous, the expected.

I stop practicing two months in when Dolla stops eating. I become consumed with persuading her to take food. She nibbles a morsel of chicken, which then falls out of her mouth. I beg her in my mind: If you eat this, you'll live. When she stops drinking, we take her to the doggie hospital where she spends a day on an intravenous drip. The vet schedules her for an ultrasound. I regret not sleeping with Dolla on our bed during the seven years I've had her. Now, I lay pillows under sheets along the sides of my bed to prevent her from falling off. I position her by my feet although I want her by my face. I know neither of us will sleep. She sleeps with her eyes partially open; the right one protrudes, glassy and blue.

I lie awake. Her laboured snores come to me like music. I follow the phrases and pauses. Blood vessels have integrated with rough masses that clutch Dolla's adrenal glands. Her blood pressure is so high, the veterinary assistant thinks it must be an error. She is dying, although I feel false for saying this while she is still warm against me. The hacks, the stumbles, the refusal of food and water—these are motions towards death. But at what point do we decide that she is dying rather than living? Aren't we all at varying degrees of death? Her

warmth, a wag of the tail, how she follows me to lie at my feet—these are acts of living. She is weak but she is alive, still willing to take her medication.

This morning, she sniffed the crocuses new in the grass as the wind blew petals from the budding fruit trees. More than anything she loves popping the heads off of plump pre-spring dandelions, but it's still too early for them. I pray for dandelions to emerge ahead of schedule this year. Each day I make broth. Chicken, carrots, celery. Cool the mash, slide fingers against warm bones to peel meat. I now know the contours of the halved cavity of a chicken, the satisfying prying of my thumbnail against boiled heart and lung. It's a struggle to understand at what point I should stop trying to feed her to keep her alive. Today, Dolla refuses my offerings, leaps away from the food, tail down and body shivering. Violent groans sound from the belly she refuses to fill.

I remember dandelions. I scour the neighbourhood for the bright yellow flower and find one growing where a building meets the sidewalk. I snap the stem and bring it home. Without hesitation, Dolla mouths small bouquets of yellow petals, a white seed at the base of each one.

I impatiently check my mail for a response from UBC. I only want to know where I stand, if a Master's degree is even a possibility for me. I'm still unsure if I want to partake in institutionalized learning. With each day that passes, I try to convince myself that I don't. I'm worried the academic world will soften my edge. Though these days, the only edge I have is from lack of sleep.

Although Dolla never had many teeth, she used to eat like she'd never see food again. I used to have to put a ball in her food dish to slow her down. Since eating her first dandelion of 2016, she has taken to eating bits and bites. She eats up to four flowers a day, sometimes not eating anything else.

I manage to squeeze in a couple of song practices. After the gaps, I'm not as bad as I thought I'd be. A few buzzy strings but I do that even on my best days.

I haven't written anything since Dolla has been ill.

I brace for her death.

The CBC announces: *30 patients to test dandelion's cancer-killing potential*. Dolla must have known. I wonder if her dandelion diet is what has brought her back, temporarily, from the edge of life. Also in the news, prog-rock drummer Bill Bruford (of King Crimson, Yes) obtains his PhD in music at the University of

Surrey. On this same day, I am accepted by the University of British Columbia to earn my Masters in Creative Writing. I accept the offer within seconds of receiving it. Apparently, I *did* want to go. I am resigned, it seems, to practicing my craft. Perhaps, like Dr. Bruford, I will go for my PhD, too.

The intensity of living potential-last-moments with Dolla, this hyper-present state, is taking its toll. Adrenaline keeps me level-headed and functioning until I'm over-exhausted and unable to sleep. Through the hours of trying to feed her I forget to feed myself. Both of us know we must eat; neither of us can mouth our food. Dolla has stopped trembling and hacking. Her appetite comes and goes. She has energy for short walks and follows me from room to room, always nestling at my feet. These are improvements, but how much time will they give her?

I kiss her belly shaved from the ultrasound. It's cooler than I expect. The slight swirl of her fur is more visible here, as is her blurred identification tattoo, her loose skin and dark nipples. I hear the churning of a stomach but I'm unable to discern if it is hers or my own. Dolla turns and kicks me in the face, her one bulging eye an opaque midnight marble. Her natural scent has been suppressed by the sterility of the clinic, by medicated shampoos and antiseptic wipes. Perhaps the medication is permeating her skin, replacing the yeasty popcorn-like odours of age that I know I'll miss when she is gone. I await the release of grief. I wonder when I will know that I've held her enough.

In only a day and a half, the bunch of close-bloomed dandelions I keep in a glass of water have metamorphosed into feathery seeds ready for flight. Their softness and colour is the same as Dolla's fur. I didn't know this plant's lifespan was so short.

Dolla won't eat a dandelion unless it is garden-fresh, but she's had a few days of steady eating and drinking and has amazingly returned to her normal self, interested and playful, a dance in her step. I've started to make audio recordings of her sleep. Her hard breaths are melodies, seeds for possible songs.

Dolla has a day of diarrhea. I parse through the pile for signs of blood, find crimson-coloured veins. She is panicked, tired, nauseous. I ready myself for further downs, possible ups. I try quail eggs, chicken eggs, oatmeal in broth, rice, chicken, cottage cheese, puffed kamut, yogurt, peanut butter, ground venison, canned dog food and kibble, various treats. I end up syringing Rebound liquid diet into the pouch of her mouth. She eats a crumble of a treat and two dandelions.

Ballistic trauma. This is the phrase that is used to describe Keith Emerson's cause of death. Others call it suicide. The internet is abuzz with talk about how he was a perfectionist, how the degeneration of his hands plagued him, how he didn't want to disappoint his fans. Life is practice. So is dying. How can any of us perfect either one?

Dolla hangs on. Outside, the heavy rains take a break. We go out for a morning walk and are blinded by the sunshine reflecting off the post-storm pavement. Cherry blossom petals fall around us. I'm feeling the first glimmers of excitement about starting my MFA. For my thesis, in keeping with prog-rock tradition, I am thinking of writing a concept album.

Dolla takes time to sniff each smudge of pink on the sidewalk. Around us, the dandelions are no longer scarce but thousands of bright, full suns nestled in the grass.