

Hung Up: Bob Dylan's Kind of Freedom (And the Things In the Way)

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Dedicated to Vincent Murphy

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Introduction

Ab, my friends from the prison, they ask unto me

"How good, how good does it feel to be free?"

And I answer them most mysteriously

"Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?"

-Bob Dylan, "Ballad In Plain D," 1964

The search to define and attain freedom is no stranger to the poet's pen, the twelve-bar blues, or the American psyche. It should come as no surprise, then, that it is omnipresent in Bob Dylan's career, outlining the very world he walks through. Dylan's vision of freedom comes out clearly but often very differently in songs from all of his albums. He sings about the freedom of the highway, an American blues freedom: "An' I'm walkin' down the line/ My feet'll be a-flyin'/ To tell about my troubled mind" ("Walkin' Down the Line"). Is it the wild beatnik freedom in songs like "I Shall Be Free" that he is after, a freedom to act as one pleases, or political and social liberty, freedom from oppression? Often, Dylan does not seem to distinguish between these different kinds of freedom until they run up against each other. The path of one freedom has often led him, as freedom is wont to do, to a place where he has lost another. The prophetic call of "The Times They Are A-Changin'" drew a legion of hopefuls with a host of expectations, and soon Dylan found himself chained to movements and a role and he ran as fast he could. Likewise, the manic life described in "I Shall Be Free" is only a few years of experience from the soured decadence of "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," which sees its carefree hero become an embittered drunk, "lost in the rain in Juarez." Inevitably, something gets in the way, and these limiting forces, these abridgers of total freedom fascinate Dylan. His work can be seen, to borrow Christopher Ricks' phrase, as a taxonomy of constraints, what Dylan has called "chains" and "hang-ups." I do not intend to define Dylan's true sense of what freedom is; that is a vast and inevitably presumptuous task. Instead, I have chosen to look

at the forces and mindsets that he sees holding people back and the ways they seem to weigh upon Dylan himself.

In an essay which struggles gamely with the task I have chosen to shirk, entitled “Freedom in Dylan’s Lyrics,” Elizabeth Brake pays close attention to the difference between freedom from external constraints—a freedom of negation—and freedom as the capacity to get the best out of your life—a freedom of affirmation. Brake frames this essential distinction in a larger intellectual and historical context.

The history of philosophy contains a debate over two competing understandings of freedom, negative freedom and positive freedom, a contrast famously illuminated by Isaiah Berlin in his 1958 essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” ... Negative freedom, or liberty as non-interference, is a classical liberal ideal in politics ... When we consider that people may have compulsive or inauthentic desires, negative freedom seems inadequate. Its competing ideal of positive freedom may then seem more attractive. Positive freedom, as Berlin explains it, is the ability to control oneself, mastering one’s worse—irrational, addicted—self.¹

Brake asserts that “for Dylan, understanding freedom as ‘freedom to do whatever one wants, without external interference’ is unsatisfactory,”² and I agree. Yet, this paper is primarily concerned with Berlin’s inadequate “negative freedom,” the throwing off of chains, although this is by no means the extent of Dylan’s vision of a complete life. When all the burdens and illusions of the world have been lifted or ripped off your back, you must begin to build new constraints, to define yourself not only by what you are not—and there is a long list of things which Dylan is adamantly not—but in terms of who you are. “Positive freedom” is, I think, an incomplete term for the steps we take to form an identity. It is really the freedom to tie oneself down, and Dylan represents

¹ Elizabeth Brake, “‘To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest’: Freedom in Dylan’s Lyrics,” in *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*, ed. Carl Porter and Peter Vernezze. (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2006): 81-82.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

these self-imposed constraints in the full complexity of their nature. A man's self conception or his marriage can be just as stifling as the job at Maggie's farm he has left behind. Ultimately, though, Dylan affirms these binding choices in his body of work and his words. Absolute freedom is not the goal; rather, Dylan is trying to find the things worth abridging freedom for and keep them close.

In a 1964 *New Yorker* interview, Dylan acknowledges the importance and prevalence of all these constraints, chosen or otherwise, but places himself gleefully above them.

What's wrong is how few people are free. Most people walking around are tied down to something that doesn't let them really *speake*, so they just add their confusion to the met. I mean, they have some kind of vested interest in the way things are now. Me, I'm cool.³

It is debatable how much of this cool, self-satisfied indifference was a pose and in what ways it reflected Dylan's feelings at the time. The song "My Back Pages," off the 1964 "Another Side of Bob Dylan" album, chronicles a character's path from a defined attitude into the uncertainty of youth, coming back to the wistful couplet "Ah, but I was so much older then/ I'm younger than that now." As he remembers himself, the character used to be "hung-up", "using ideas as my maps" and making brave declarations, thinking in "black and white" about "phony jealousy" and "equality in school" until it had "deceived me into thinking I had something to protect." Dylan suggests that our opinions and inflexible ideas trap us and make us old, but at the end of the song he offers a reservation about the new uncertainty he has found: "Good and bad, I define these terms/ Quite clear, no doubt, somehow..." Other than the refrain, this is the only instance of the present tense in the song, and it hints that Dylan's character cannot throw away all preconceptions, all mindsets.

³ Bob Dylan. Interview by Nat Hentoff. *The New Yorker*, October 24, 1964. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 23.

If “My Back Pages” does its best to shake off the yoke of categorical and abstract thinking, contemporaneous songs such as “It Ain’t Me, Babe” and “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” find Dylan gleefully throwing the traditional role of the lover and the love song over his shoulder. In “It Ain’t Me, Babe,” as the title suggests, Dylan defines who and what he is not: “Someone who will promise never to part/ Someone to close his eyes for you/ Someone to close his heart.” The Dylan who sings those words is hard, but the words suggest that he has tried to be all these things and more. Robert Shelton calls the song both “a catalog of love’s burdens” and “a rejection of the mythology of true love.”⁴ Two bitter subjects, and yet Dylan sings of them with a sense of joy and even, on Vol. 6 of the Bootleg Series, a voice cracking with laughter. The man who Dylan either never was or is now refusing to be is chained to his love, “A lover for your life an’ nothing more.” In this rejection, the song becomes a declaration of independence. “Don’t Think Twice” is kinder in its dismissal, but the point is the same: “I once loved a woman, a child I’m told/ I gave her my heart, but she wanted my soul.” This clever turnaround of Dylan’s makes a subtle distinction. To give your heart is a weighty thing indeed and an old trope of love songs and poetry. But to give your soul is far heavier, far more permanent. To ask for it is to expect too much. In both songs, Dylan does not portray love as sacred; he casts it as a bond of expectations that tie two people to each other.. In the wreckage of these mismatched expectations, Dylan finds a new freedom in “trav’lin’ on” (“Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright”).

This sense of freedom was, according to Robert Shelton, hard earned and often out of tune with the way Dylan was actually feeling in the 1960s. Shelton describes the Dylan who was writing these songs as “at low ebb...alone in his dingy West Fourth Street hole, pouring out his songs and his back

⁴ Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan*. (New York, NY: Beech Tree Books, 1986): 223.

pages”⁵ Many of the things that Dylan was proclaiming himself exempt from in the press and in his songs were in fact clawing at him, including the need to maintain his air of impenetrable freedom. In the media, he remained adamant about his personal freedom and the meaninglessness of abstract thought, telling Joseph Haas in late 1965, “I don’t like anybody to tell me what I have to do or believe, how I have to live. I just don’t care, you know. Philosophy can’t give me anything that I don’t already have.”⁶ In fact, Shelton’s account of the young singer agrees with the accounts of two of Dylan’s lovers, Joan Baez and Suze Rotolo, in its portrayal of a man very much concerned with philosophical and spiritual questions. In hindsight, Dylan would admit to this charge himself. Moreover, Dylan was agonized by the thought of what was left if he found no answers. Dylan to Shelton: “I was actually most afraid of death in those first years around New York... I don’t want to hear myself dying, or taste myself or smell myself dying.”⁷

Love, too, hit Dylan in the gut: “After Suze moved out of the house ... I got very, very strung out for a while.”⁸ In light of his reflections, the cavalier spirit of lines like “don’t think twice” and “you go your way and I’ll go mine” seems more of an act; a man in pain putting on a brave face. Dylan was not observing these hang-ups from a comfortable distance; they weighed upon him just as surely as they weigh upon everybody else. 30 years later on “Things Have Changed,” he would sing “I hurt easy, I just don’t show it.” Dylan remarks to Shelton that his writing comes out of his hang-ups: “I’ve really got a sickness man. I don’t write when I’m feeling groovy, you understand. I play

⁵ Shelton, 205-206.

⁶ Bob Dylan. Interview by Joseph Haas. *Chicago Daily News*, November 27, 1965. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 59.

⁷ Shelton, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 355.

when I'm feeling groovy. I write when I'm sick. I'm not going to push that on anybody.”⁹

I intend to consider the ways Dylan's circumstances, in particular the ones that appear negative and unfortunate, have affected the music that he puts out. I was tempted to draw a line between “internal” constraints—casts of mind and emotional deficiencies—and “external” constraints—social injustice, failing relationships, working conditions, the strain of touring and fame. However, Dylan's work often offers insight into the unbreakable connection between external circumstances and internal hang-ups, probing these relationships to find the root of the malady. In “A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall,” he wrote that “the executioner's face is always well hidden,” and Dylan has a knack for uncovering the executioners. Sometimes they are tangible men and women: William Zanzinger, ye playboys and playgirls, you masters of war, the entire family of a gal named Maggie, Arthur Dexter Bradley and Alfred Bello, and Dylan himself—these people and more fall under the sharp indictment of Dylan's pen. Dylan used to call these songs “finger-pointing songs” and his fan base continued to do so long after he had dropped the classification. But he saw deeper executioners working on these men and women, societal and emotional forces that drove them to oppress and to turn a blind eye and to murder. This is a man who stood up in front of the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee and expressed his sympathy for Lee Harvey Oswald because Oswald was “up tight” and he could relate, because he “saw in him a lot of the times we're all living in”¹⁰ This comment, issued by only three weeks after Oswald shot John Kennedy in Dallas, shocked and angered the crowd of civil-rights activists. Their anger was understandable and perhaps righteous, and Dylan was stone-drunk at the time, but his words served to separate him from his audience and the narrow, sedentary perspective he associated with them.

⁹ Shelton, 60.

¹⁰ Ibid., 203.

Mike Marqusee suggests that “Dylan’s impromptu identification with Oswald was a blunt instrument enabling him to register a sense of alienation that had gone way beyond disquiet over racism and nuclear arms.”¹¹ Dylan has never been a judge, pointing fingers at red-handed culprits, and when this role was set up for him by the civil rights movement, he turned away from it. He is more of a doctor, searching for the roots of his patients’ pain and his patients’ chains, though his music was the only cure he could offer.

I have chosen to view the spectra of internal and external constraints as a seamless whole. Instead, I intend to distinguish between the constraints that befall Dylan and the ones that he has consciously imposed upon himself. This distinction is arguably just as blurred as the one I have refused, but I think it is more helpful. The first category includes all the aforementioned societal tides, enforced rules, unconscious assumptions and prejudices, and soul sicknesses that come down upon Dylan and upon everyone else unbidden. These are the burdens that negative freedom seeks to throw off. The second category comprises his conscious decisions to walk down one path, though in doing so he may forsake many others. Marriage, religion, the trials of touring, the choice of a particular musical palette, and the various ways in which Dylan has performed and recorded his material over the years all qualify as self-imposed constraints and part of the concept of positive freedom. I do not mean to suggest that these two types of constraints and their respective freedoms are unrelated; in fact, the opposite is true. The choices Dylan has made have always reflected his circumstances, whether they seek to accept them or drive them away, and his circumstances, in turn, have reflected his choices. Perhaps that goes without saying for every person, but I want to clarify my reasons for making this division. Marriage may hang Dylan up just as surely as civil injustice or the war in Vietnam, but it belongs to him and his wife in a way the

¹¹ Mike Marqusee, *Chimes of Freedom: The Politics of Bob Dylan's Art*. (New York, NY: New Press, 2003): 89.

war never will. They have chosen it and they are responsible for its effect on their lives. In looking at the self-imposed limits Dylan has set for himself, we can trace the outlines of a kind of freedom in the very act of setting up boundaries. With the bird's wings come the skyway.

All of the negative aspects of these boundaries are represented in Dylan's music, and I intend to give them equal representation in this paper. Dylan's sympathy "for the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an' worse/ An' for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe," as it is expressed in does in "Chimes of Freedom," is a major part of his artistic integrity and long-lasting success. However, Dylan has suggested that this is an incomplete picture. "The energy of hurt isn't enough to create art,"¹² he told Ron Rosenbaum in a 1978 interview. Dylan suggests that the artist, in making his art, makes a commitment, if only to that particular song, painting, or album. For the art and the artist to be something, they must tie themselves to an idea, a mood, or a lifestyle, and in doing so must reject many other possibilities. The nature of the chain changes when you have chosen it. In "Restless Farewell," the coda of Dylan's third album, he plays with the push-and-pull of needing to commit to beliefs, practices, and people while maintaining an identity that transcends the circumstances of the moment.

And ev'ry cause that ever I fought
I fought it full without regret or shame
But the dark does die
As the curtain is drawn and somebody's eyes
Must meet the dawn
And if I see the day
I'd only have to stay
So I'll bid farewell in the night and be gone

¹² Dylan, Bob. Interview by Ron Rosenbaum. Playboy, March 1978. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 227.

A consideration of the relationship between Dylan's constraints and his music will not be complete without an acknowledgement of the positive and formative aspects of Dylan's self-imposed constraints and the sense in which his art is impossible without limits and decisions.

The Constraints

Look out kid, it's something you did

Don't know when but you're doing it again

-Bob Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues," 1965

But first, the negatives. Again, the scope of the topic runs up against, fittingly, the constraints of the intended length of this paper. Perspectives on what it means to be hung-up and how one gets there can be found in nearly every Dylan album, interview, and written piece. An attempt to follow Dylan's push-and-pull with the forces holding him back from his adolescence until his old age would lose sight of the full range of constraints in favor of the full range of years. Instead, I will consider numerous constraints working in a limited set of instances—two songs and one poem. The songs I have chosen are "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," the seven and a half minute penultimate song on Dylan's 1966 *Bringing It All Back Home* album, and "Idiot Wind" from 1975's *Blood on the Tracks*. The earlier song is a list of hang-ups and a roll call of the executioners Dylan saw gathering around him, and it finds him at a curious crossroads, wise enough to acknowledge their enduring presence but unwilling to be run down by them. This "absolute protest epic,"¹³ as Oliver Trager described it in his "Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia," is pertinent to Dylan's career not only for the relevance and breadth of its topic but also for its consistent presence in his live performances since its recording in 1965.¹⁴ "Idiot Wind" is a mirror image of "It's Alright Ma" and another protest epic, in its own way. The scale is both smaller and more vast; it is

These songs find an equally broad and scathing if more playful partner in "Advice for Geraldine on Her Miscellaneous Birthday," which first appeared

¹³ Oliver Trager, *Keys to the Rain: The Definitive Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*. (New York, NY: Billboard Books, 2004): 322.

¹⁴ Glen Dundas, *Tangled Up In Tapes: A Recording History of Bob Dylan*. 4th Ed. (Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada: SMA Services, 1999).

in the liner notes for a concert Dylan gave at New York's Philharmonic Hall on Halloween, 1964.¹⁵ This poem is a series of aphorisms; advice for some girl, any girl, any *one* trying to dodge the social and mental traps all around them. In particular, Dylan writes to a lucky girl who has found fame and recognition, perhaps for her art. Dylan's advice ranges from succinct and earnest suggestions, to sarcastic strategies that hint at bitterness and contempt, and finally to the completely ridiculous. "It's Alright Ma" and "Advice for Geraldine" find Dylan at his least forgiving and his most harried, painfully aware of the walls closing in on his freedom and resigned to their presence. But they also find him at his most resilient, unwilling to let himself be trapped. On the other hand, "Idiot Wind" is about being trapped, caught in a force as unyielding as the wind. Love is on the admittedly soft border between inevitable and self-imposed constraints—it is both inevitable and invited, and it finds us both powerless and willing.

"It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" begins with darkness and an admission of defeat: "The handmade blade, the child's balloon/ Eclipses both the sun and moon/ To understand you know too soon/ There is no sense in trying." Where can the song and its singer possibly go from this opening salvo of despondency? The question is not phrased as though it is only Dylan's to answer; the song makes use of a shifting perspective, moving from "you" to "they" and finally to "I." Six of the song's fifteen verses make use of the second person in a way that Dylan rarely does, narrating the plight of a "you" that is intangible and universal, as much "me," "he," and "she" as "you." Dylan has many songs that focus exclusively or nearly exclusively on a "you"—"I Want You," "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," "Seeing the Real You at Last," to name a meager few—but are addressed to a "you" who becomes a distinct individual; usually a "she" and certainly not a "me." Closer to the tone of "It's Alright Ma" is "Rainy Day Women #12 & 35," the opener of the 1966 *Blonde*

¹⁵ Shelton, 264.

On Blonde album, with its comic repetition of “they’ll stone ya” and later “they’ll stone you,” but that song separates the “they” who stone from the “you” getting stoned, and Dylan’s refrain makes the identity of this “you” even clearer: “But I would not feel so all alone/ Everybody must get stoned.” The pure second person that Dylan employs on “It’s Alright Ma” does not return until “Ye Shall Be Changed,” a song from around the time of Dylan’s *Slow Train Coming* album in 1979 that was released on *The Bootleg Series, Vols. 1-3*. “Ye Shall Be Changed” echoes “It’s Alright Ma” strongly in form and imagery, with verses that lament your dissatisfaction and your lack of freedom: “You wish for contentment/ But you got an emptiness that can’t be filled/ You’ve had enough of hatred/ Your bones are breaking, can’t find nothing sacred.” All these years later, you can still see without looking too far. But from these eerily similar verses, the song reaches a different conclusion in its chorus, in light of Dylan’s Christianity. “Ye shall be changed,” he promises.

The two primary effects of Dylan’s use of the impersonal second person in these two songs are to make the hang-ups that he describes more relatable and to grant them a sense of inevitability. If the line were “Advertising signs they con/ Him into thinking he’s the one/ That can do what’s never been done” our minds might rationalize his susceptibility: perhaps he is an idiot, or perhaps he is over-confident in the first place. Instead, there is the finality of “Advertising signs they con/ you into thinking you’re the one” which leaves no room for an alternative, deception-free existence. The landscape of “It’s Alright Ma” is framed by this inevitability, which separates it from Dylan’s earlier songs about human suffering. It is not a call to a new world, where the bonds have been loosened and the truth is clear. Nor is it a guide to help its listeners navigate the cruel world and emerge as intact as possible. Dylan is mired in the real experience of social and personal ills. In Robert Shelton’s words, “he sees that the flaws of life are beyond good and evil.”¹⁶ Which is not to say that there

¹⁶ Shelton, 277.

is no blame to throw around; blame falls all around like a tangled web where everyone—they, us, you, I, him, her—is both victim and executioner.

Ideology

In the fourth verse of “It’s Alright, Ma,” Dylan begins to call out the hidden executioners, naming first those who profess hard-line truths and uncompromising ideologies. “As some warn victory, some downfall” brings to mind the dream lover in “Love Minus Zero/ No Limit,” from the same album, who “Knows there’s no success like failure/ And that failure’s no success at all.” Victory and downfall are not set in stone for Dylan, or at least they were not for the young Dylan. This is a maturation of Dylan’s outright rejection of black and white beliefs on “My Back Pages.” He no longer sees only the absurd irony proclamations like “Don’t hate nothing at all/ Except hatred,” but looks through them and sees basic human incentives. Behind every rigid stance and deep-seated belief he sees “private reasons great or small.” All of these social forces, whether they work good or ill, can be traced back to human foibles, insecurities, or desires.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth verses, Dylan gives us two examples of public figures driven by private reasons. With the overconfidence of self-satisfied, invincible youth, Dylan calls out the moral law that the previous generation holds on to: “Old lady judges watch people in pairs/ Limited in sex, they dare/ to push fake morals, insult and stare.” In like fashion, Dylan traces religious and spiritual beliefs back to a need for security and fear of death:

“While them that defend what they cannot see
With a killer’s pride, security
It blows the minds most bitterly
For that that think death’s honesty
Won’t fall upon them naturally
Life sometimes must get lonely”

While this verse gains a tint of irony after Dylan's 1979 conversion to Christianity, it fits right in with the rest of the portrait of ideology in "It's Alright Ma." Morality, at this point in Dylan's life, was a symptom of insecurity more than a force of its own.

The real culprits were deeper and more basic. With this in mind, Dylan proposes two tactics to counter the most earnest of activists and preachers. The first is absurdity of the sort that Dylan mastered in his interviews, absurdity that highlights the absurdity of defining oneself with a fixed, unchanging belief. In "Advice for Geraldine," he offers some suggestions: "asked if you're a communist, sing/ america the beautiful in an/ Italian accent...when asked if you're a capitalist, rip/ open your shirt, sing buddy can/ you spare a dime with your right foot forward an' proceed t'/ chew up a dollar bill." A second, more serious piece of advice that Dylan gives is chilling: "When asked if you care about/ the world's problems," Dylan wrote in "Advice for Geraldine", "look deeply/ into the eyes of he that asks/ you, he will not ask you again." Statements like this have allowed the word misanthrope to sneak into conversations about Dylan in his later career, but I would argue that the image of a deep, penetrating stare implies connection with the real plight of the questioner, not distance and apathy. Dylan confronts ideology with that stare, which pierces through the outward expression—abstract belief and logic—to the hurt or desire that it hides, the real humanity. Years later, with some of his youthful uncertainty eased, Dylan was asked if some sort of search led him to Christ. His reply, as apt in 1984 as it had been in 1964 and would be in 2008 was: "If I was searching, it was just to...get down to the root reality of the way things really are, to pull the mask off. My thing was always to pull the mask off of whatever was going on."¹⁷ Of course, as it goes with Dylan, the nature of

¹⁷ Bob Dylan. Interview by Robert Hilburn. *The Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1980. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 282.

the mask has changed drastically since he wrote “It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” but the human weaknesses beneath them remain.

Insecurity and Society

At the heart of the society that “It’s Alright Ma” reacts against is insecurity. The word can mean many things, but here it is meant not as a lack of self-confidence or a problem with our collective hair. The insecurity that Dylan is concerned with is a partner of free thought; it is the blessing and the curse of living in the wake of Protestantism, the Enlightenment, and two brutal World Wars. By the 1960’s, religion, government, and moral thought had all lost their absolute authority in the western world, leaving people with liberating but difficult uncertainty. At the same time, Dylan was writing in an America whose undying faith in the Individual placed and still places immense pressure on each and every one of us to succeed, though the standards by which we will be judged are unclear. Dylan said it simple in his first single: “I got mixed up confusion/ Man, it’s a killin’ me/ Well there’s too many people/ And they’re all too hard to please.” (“Mixed Up Confusion”).

In “It’s Alright Ma,” Dylan reacts to the lack of clear meaning in the modern world and attacks the vast expectations hoisted upon its inhabitants. This lack of meaning was amplified by the ready availability of factory-made goods and the resulting national obsession with them. The song’s fifth stanza addresses the effect of mass production directly. The imagery is religious, with “Human gods” who make “flesh-colored Christs,” but there is something in those phrases that is crude and displeasing to eye and ear. Mass production literally cheapens product, and Dylan extends this effect to ideas and spiritualities. There is no hint of personal feeling either way in the stanza’s punchline, which observes “that not much is really sacred.” Mike Marqusee devoted a book to the relationship between Dylan’s music and the political and

social climate that surrounded it, and he gives due credit to the “consumer society”:

In retrospect, Dylan’s premature political disillusionment reflected not only the stresses of revolt and reaction, but also the relentless packaging of experience and identity in a consumer society. For Dylan and many others, one level of consciousness seemed to be quickly superseded by another; if you stayed at one level too long you risked being as obsolescent—and as inauthentic—as last year’s fashions.¹⁸

Dylan was in tune with the quick cheapening of every new stance and cause, and for a time his career became a series of negations with few truths to replace them.¹⁹

In his essay on “Passion and the Absurd in Dylan’s Later Work,” Rick Furtak argues that there is a connection between existentialist thought and much of Dylan’s work from *Blood on the Tracks* forward.²⁰ His argument could easily be extended to include Dylan’s earlier songs, and it applies to “It’s Alright Ma.” The sense of lost or fading meaning that Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard were responding to in their writing is the same modern malady that Dylan’s narrator crashes up against in the song. It is born of the same dissolution of old values, the same devastating wars, and the same tide of industrialization and advertising. Dylan’s answer, as he tells it, sighs it, or bleeds it to his ma in the song’s choruses, is existentialist in its own way, but more on that later.

The middle three verses of the song are a second person account of the experience of this modern insecurity, with the finger firmly pointed towards the expectations of society. After the advertising signs have pulled off their con while “life outside goes on/ all around you,” you have an awakening of sorts to

¹⁸ Marqusee, 112.

¹⁹ Brake, 80.

²⁰ Rick Anthony Furtak, “‘I Used to Care, But Things Have Changed’: Passion and the Absurd in Dylan’s Later Work,” in *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*, ed. Carl Porter and Peter Vernezze. (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2006): 18.

the loneliness and insecurity of your situation. Dylan implies that once you have lost yourself and reappeared, shaken off your fears and seen through the false expectations of society, you are left utterly alone. This truth is the executioner unmasked and the reason the people Dylan sees around him are constrained by their beliefs, their “social clubs in drag disguise”, or their jobs. To be free from all of these things in a consumer society, as Dylan has sometimes claimed to be, is to be alone. Here is freedom, if you can stand it. Can Dylan?

That’s the cause of a lot of those chains I was talking about—people wanting to be accepted, people not wanting to be alone. But, after all, what is it to be alone? I’ve been alone sometimes in front of three thousand people.²¹

Time and again, Dylan puts on a tough face. But he knows better. “Like a Rolling Stone,” Dylan’s great put-down, reproaches someone who has attained this kind of “negative freedom.”²² There is pity and scorn in Dylan’s “How does it feel,” and no chimes of freedom ringing as he sings, “When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose/ You’re invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal.” (“Like a Rolling Stone”). Another truth that Dylan points to, regardless of society, freedom, time and place, is the bare need that humans have for each other’s company and recognition.

Love, Sex, and Friendship

At the very moment when you have attained this blank, fearless freedom, “a trembling distant voice, unclear/ startles your sleeping ears to hear/ that somebody thinks they really found you” (“It’s Alright Ma”). This is no love song, but its protagonists—you, I, she, Dylan—cannot stay away from that

²¹ Bob Dylan. Interview by Nat Hentoff. The New Yorker, October 24, 1964: 27.

²² Brake, 81.

distant voice that represents human connection. With interpersonal contact comes a whole new set of expectations and constraints, and though Dylan tries to shake these off just like he did his political role, you understand, he knows too soon: there is no sense in trying.

“A question in your nerves is lit” by this new somebody. The question, I think, is the same one of identity. If rigid ideas have not satisfied you, asking more of you than you were willing to give, perhaps you may find a true self in your relationships with others. Elizabeth Brake sees this question of “self-realization” as essential to Dylan’s music, but concedes that “the concept of an authentic self is difficult: is it innate, waiting to be released, or must it be created? If the latter, what gives it authenticity?”²³ Brake says that Dylan gives no clear answer, offering an “epistemology of the self, an account of how we come to know it, rather than a metaphysics, or an account of what the self is.”²⁴ Certainly, Dylan could not find it in pure isolation, for his wistful narrator submits that “there is no answer fit/ to satisfy, insure you not to quit/ to keep it in your mind and not forget/ that it is not he or she or them or it/ that you belong to.” (“It’s Alright Ma”). Dylan may have been, as he told Shelton in 1966, “strung out with people,”²⁵ but he knows he could never live without them. A 1978 interview for *Rock Express* points to a balance:

Karen Hughes: How much can you exist in isolation without needing other people?

Bob Dylan: Without drinking any hemlock?

Hughes: Yeah

Dylan: I don’t know. I really don’t know. I mean I have to go out and see people, but I still need to pull the night shades down too.²⁶

²³ Brake, 84.

²⁴ Ibid., 84.

²⁵ Shelton, 355.

²⁶ Bob Dylan. Interview. By Karen Hughes. *Rock Express*, April 1, 1978. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 249

Could self-realization, for Dylan, be as simple as achieving this balance by stepping back from the expectations of society, accepting radical insecurity, and then finding another person who is in a similar place? If only. Brake talks about a whole other set of interpersonal constraints and injuries, a glut of “petty wants and parasitic desires”²⁷ that are timeless human faults, existing beyond societal context. This “pettiness which plays so rough” (“It’s Alright Ma”) comes dressed in different guises. It is the vengeful lover, the jealous friend, and the careless cruelties cast about. When Dylan is most effective at confronting it, he does not make himself exempt. The gleeful scorn in Dylan’s most one-sided songs of accusation, like “Ballad of a Thin Man” and “Positively 4th Street,” is both great insight and great fun, and the latter yields my favorite insult ever put to music: “Yes, I wish that for just one time/ You could stand inside my shoes/ You’d know what a drag it is/ To see you.” But all these songs do not tell the whole story; there is no give and take in the relationships they describe. As Christopher Ricks notes of “Positively 4th Street,” “the song itself is concentratedly one-sided, and from the very beginning it makes clear that it is going to strike unrelentingly the same note and the same target.”²⁸ As Dylan’s career progressed into the 1970s, his songs became more and more concerned with mutual failures in human communication and connection. Songs such as “The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest,” “Dirge,” and “Simple Twist of Fate” give equal credit to both parties in the broken relationships they convey. The album *Blood on the Tracks* is a library for any student of these inadequacies and mistakes, and there is no book in it quite as potent as “Idiot Wind.”

In many ways, “Idiot Wind” is a partner to “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” a panoramic view of a world cracked in inevitable ways, neither wrong nor right but simply broken. This time, a human relationship that feels

²⁷ Brake, 81.

²⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Inc., 2004): 55.

like every meaningful human relationship is put on trial instead of the larger society. The verdict: “We’re idiots, babe/ It’s a wonder we can even feed ourselves.” The opening line lets us know that we are in a realm where personal intent—real, direct malice—has more power than it does in the vast landscape of “It’s Alright, Ma.” Gone are the accidental executioners and their indirect harm. Dylan begins, “Someone’s got it in for me.” And why not, when there is blood on the hands of his narrator as well. “They say I shot a man named Gray and took his wife to Italy/ She inherited a million bucks and when she died it came to me/ I can’t help it if I’m lucky” (“Idiot Wind”). Dylan points out that there is a capacity for cruelty in all of us, and a capacity for forgiving our own cruelties. No one is a helpless victim.

When asked by Jonathan Cott, in the wake of *Blood on the Tracks*, why he had “been able to keep so in touch with your anger throughout the years,” Dylan credited “will power,” and said that “with strength of will you can do anything.”²⁹ If every person’s will is so capable, then it follows that when two wills become closely intertwined, as they do in love and in hate, they must clash. All the constraints that lovers construct for themselves and each other serve to stop the blood from flowing, but most of the time it does anyways. Dylan captures this paradox of sorts, an inevitable fate born out of the very strength of our free wills. “It was gravity which pulled us down and destiny which broke us apart/ You tamed the lion in my cage but it just wasn’t enough to change my heart” (“Idiot Wind”).

In interviews, Dylan doesn’t sound concerned with the concept or meaning of love, often dodging interviewers with protests that he is “not too qualified on that subject”³⁰ or that he doesn’t know anything about women.³¹

²⁹ Bob Dylan. Interview. By Jonathan Cott. *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978. In *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 194.

³⁰ Bob Dylan. Interview. By Jonathan Cott. *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 1978. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 261.

At the same time, his music, particularly on the mid-70s series of albums that includes *Planet Waves*, *Blood on the Tracks*, and *Desire*, is often preoccupied with the nature or natures of love, which comes across as an inadequate word for many different sensations and relationships. Doug Anderson argues that *Planet Waves* is Dylan's version of Plato's dialogue on the forms of love, the *Symposium*.³² He sees the album as a progression, beginning with the innocent, youthful crush that develops into the sensual and erotic adult love and finally touching on the nature of true love and *agape* love.³³ While Anderson's categories are well thought out and can easily be fitted to Dylan's work, I am inclined to believe Dylan when he expresses a lack of interest in such questions of what love is and why we are so hung up on it. To him, the existence of the need—for sex, for companionship, for communication—it is beyond philosophizing or rationalizing, as is the clash of wills that turns the need sour.

Love can both be constrained and constrain. A gap in communication or intention which dooms a relationship is a different sort of limit than a flourishing relationship in which the participants cannot focus on other aspects of their lives. Dylan chronicles both in "Idiot Wind." The first two stanzas of the song bemoan the effects of a private life wrenched out into the public eye by fame. Dylan's narrator laments, "People see me all the time and they just can't remember how to act/ Their minds are filled with big ideas images, and distorted facts." The more people are told about you, the less they know. His lover first enters the song as another vague "you," who disappoints his expectation that her understanding transcends that of the baffled masses. This initial let-down gives way to an accusation of real wrongdoing, painful and direct: "You hurt the ones that I love best and cover up the truth with lies."

³¹ Bob Dylan. Interview. Sam Shepard, "A Short Life of Trouble." *Esquire*, 1987. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 361

³² Doug Anderson, "Planet Waves: Dylan's Symposium," in *Bob Dylan and Philosophy*, ed. Carl Porter and Peter Vernezze. (Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company, 2006): 3

³³ *Ibid.*, 6-15.

But our sympathy for the narrator is tested by the vicious bitterness behind the next line, which either predicts or threatens that, “One day you’ll be in the ditch, flies buzzin’ around your eyes/ Blood on your saddle.” He sounds quite ready to hurt the ones that she loves best.

What forces are at work here, what executioners work behind the scenes to make these lovers so ugly in their love? Christopher Ricks makes a distinction between the sin of lust and the purity of desire. Lust is impatient, “lust has no time for humour,”³⁴ and it lacks the warmth of desire, which Ricks calls “a yearning for this reciprocated requirement, this double desirement.”³⁵ As good a definition for Dylan’s type of love as any, the emphasis being on the equality of desire. The lovers in “Idiot Wind” can no longer relate in such a way, for they have become foreign, un-relatable, and unequal to one another. “I can’t remember your face anymore, your mouth has changed, your eyes don’t look into mine” and “I can’t feel you anymore, I can’t even touch the books you’ve read.” Desire has been soured, for the narrator cannot even conceive of what its reciprocation would be like.

In its place, two of the other deadly sins come creeping like a two-headed demon: Envy and Covetousness, two faces of want without understanding. Envy, Ricks remarks, often breeds in the wake of a friendship. “If there had always been positively no two-way street, they wouldn’t now be standing in this acid rain.”³⁶ Although Ricks associates envy with the specifically reciprocal nature of friendship, it has a part to play in any serious love affair, which must, in its enduring nature, be reciprocal. Covetousness is a slippery sin, encompassing both desire for your neighbor’s possessions and an obsession with your own. Above all, it is a desire to *own*. Ricks links it to both human interaction and consumer society:

³⁴ Ricks, 170.

³⁵ Ibid., 151.

³⁶ Ricks, 55.

Guilty of what? Of being not only covetous but the cause of covetousness in others, of gratifying the covetous and of profiting from their covetousness...Guilty of what would now be called conspicuous consumption or consumerism, a fast-fed greed that supposes that it can float free of the terrible ancient verb “consume”...³⁷

“Idiot Wind” finds its one-time lover consumed by her consumptiveness, by her sins: “I noticed at the ceremony, that your corrupt ways had finally made you blind.”

Yet this record of a lover’s sins and disappointments is not the end of the song but its beginning. Pete Hamill quoted Faulkner on the back cover of *Blood on the Tracks*, describing love as “that human emotion that still exists... in spite of, not because.”³⁸ In spite of envy and covetousness, in spite of accusations and admissions of malice, in spite of all the waiting and the idiot wind, Dylan’s narrator still calls his lover “Sweet lady.” Slowly, the song slides from vicious indictment to wistful lament to remorse. By the last three stanzas, Dylan’s narrator is out of furious reproach, and only even-handed sorrow remains.

I been double-crossed now for the very last time and now I’m finally free
I kissed goodbye the howling beast on the borderline which separated you from me
You’ll never know the hurt I suffered nor the pain I rise above
And I’ll never know the same about you, your holiness or your kind of love
And it makes me feel so sorry.
 (“Idiot Wind”)

Here, Dylan’s narrator has fallen under the weight of both love constrained and love constraining. Not only has his love been thwarted by human flaws, he cannot get out from under the weight of that love’s cadaver; he is paralyzed by

³⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

³⁸ Pete Hamill, *Blood on the Tracks* liner notes, © Columbia Records, 1975.

the failure of his affair. An earlier version of the song has an ultimatum in place of this final verse, with Dylan singing, “You can have the best there is, but its gonna cost you all your love/ You won’t get it for money.”³⁹ Is all your love too much to expect? “Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright” would say so, but “Wedding Song” would beg to disagree: “Love you more than life itself, you mean that much to me.” These sentiments are both true and valid to Dylan, and the conflict between them is the gravity which brings true love down; all your love is too much to expect, but sometimes it is the only thing that will do. It is this sad truth that turns “Idiot Wind” around in its final chorus, as the attack of “You’re an idiot, babe/ It’s a wonder that you still know how to breathe” becomes the realization that “We’re idiots, babe/ It’s a wonder we can even feed ourselves.”

Fame

If Dylan doesn’t consider himself qualified on the subject of love, he is certainly qualified on the subject of covetousness. Dylan’s persona and music have inspired a level of devotion that went beyond recognition, beyond appreciation, beyond love; in the latter half of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Dylan was not so much famous as he was internationally *coveted*. The press, the social revolution, the poets, and the youth were all guilty of this sin with regards to Dylan. They expected more from him than to entertain them, amuse them, or strike at their emotions, they wanted Him in the way that you want God. Dylan, genuinely scared in 1966: “People want to tear me apart.”⁴⁰ In *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan’s loose autobiography, he recalls the introduction he received at the 1964 Newport Folk Festival:

³⁹ “Idiot Wind,” from *The Bootleg Series, vol. 1-3*, recorded September 16, 1974.

⁴⁰ Shelton, 357.

“And here he is... take him, you know him, he’s yours.” I had failed to sense the ominous forebodings in the introduction. Elvis had never even been introduced like that. “Take him, he’s yours!” What a crazy thing to say! Screw that. As far as I knew, I didn’t belong to anybody then or now.⁴¹

It casts “Don’t Think Twice” in a whole new light; he gave them his heart, but they wanted his soul. And no, it’s not alright.

The public scrutiny and misunderstanding that came with Dylan’s fame and the obsessive, quasi-religious following that he inspired is touched upon in “Idiot Wind” and anatomized in “Advice for Geraldine on Her Miscellaneous Birthday.” Is fame a constraint that one chooses and strives for; a sort of positive freedom? For Dylan, it was another uninvited burden, the worst side-effect of the need to be seen and heard that comes with the performer’s territory. Fame baffled, shocked, and infuriated Dylan, and seems to have controlled his life more potently than any other constraint. He describes an onslaught of “moochers...goons...unaccountable-looking characters, gargoyle-looking gals, scarecrows, stragglers looking to party...gate-crashers, spooks, trespassers, demagogues”⁴² coming down upon the Woodstock home he lived in with his wife and young family. They came at a time when he wanted sanctuary most, when he had traded the burdens of the road for a family to which he intended to devote all his energy. These acolytes and parasites crashed the world Dylan was trying to build for himself and smothered his positive freedom, if you will. Dylan’s first instinct was a desire to “set fire to these people.”⁴³ Once that possibility had been ruled out, he fled. He fled geographically, from rural New York back to urban New York and from New York to the west, all to no avail. He also fled from the Bob Dylan that all these people thought he was or wanted him to be, learning to “send out deviating

⁴¹ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004):

⁴² Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One*, 116-117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 117.

signals, crank up the wrecking train—create some different impressions.”⁴⁴ As Dylan describes it in *Chronicles*, he spent the 1970s in a grand, calculated effort to throw the spotlight off himself, become average, and bore the world until it would give him back what he wanted, which was “liberty for myself and my loved ones.”⁴⁵

In light of this admission, I think that the poem “Advice For Geraldine” is not as sarcastic as it appears to be. There is undoubtedly irony in snippets of how-to-conform advice like “stay in line. stay in step. People/ are afraid of someone who is not/ in step with them. It makes them/ look foolish t’ themselves for/ being in step.” But the irony does not defeat the effectiveness of the advice. Christopher Ricks on the difference:

Irony, which disagrees with its single-minded brother sarcasm, enjoys the flesh-brush friction that comes of there being an element of truth in what the other person is maintaining, even when what is said is self-serving and is not simply to be credited.⁴⁶

We shouldn’t rule out the possibility that Dylan is giving Geraldine valuable instructions on how to be dull, should she ever need to be so. The poem foreshadows the disappearing act—or uninteresting act—that Dylan would attempt in the 1970s. Dylan plays with the idea of labels, writing, “when asked t’ define yourself exactly,/ say you are an exact mathematician.” This play on words implies that precision and exact values should be saved for the world of numbers, and it also names a profession that sounds horribly boring. The questioner is the butt of the joke, but the joke is only half-funny.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁶ Ricks, 147.

Conclusion

*There must be some way out of here said the joker to the thief
There's too much confusion, I can't get no relief.
Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth,
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.*
--Bob Dylan, "All Along the Watchtower," 1968.

This is where the idea of positive freedom gets complicated. Dylan was willing to "let go of any form of artistic self-expression"⁴⁷ and put shackles on his daily life, calculating his every action with the knowledge that it might be documented. That small-scale but potent freedom of privacy put constraints on every other area of Dylan's life. Is there a way out of this constant trade of one type of freedom for another? There is hope to be had in existentialism and in forming a set of expectations that does not take society's expectations into account. In a 1978 interview, Dylan speaks to both:

Bob Dylan isn't a cat, he doesn't have nine lives, so he can only do what he can do. You know: not break under the strain. If you need someone who raises someone else to a level that is unrealistic, then it's that other person's problem.⁴⁸

Wisdom is not a secret to unlock all the chains, lift all the burdens, burst all the illusions. It is only a keen discernment of what is really your burden to carry—"I mean no harm nor put fault/ On anyone that lives in a vault/ But it's alright, Ma, if I can't please him." In the modern world, where insecurity reigns and not much is really sacred, we can still wash our hands of what we don't need—"Although the masters make the rules/ For the wise men and the fools/ I've got nothing, Ma, to live up to." I think that "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only

⁴⁷ Dylan, *Chronicles: Part One*, 121.

⁴⁸ Dylan, Bob. Interview by Ron Rosenbaum. *Playboy*, March 1978. Reprinted in *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews*, ed. Jonathan Cott. (New York, NY: Wenner Books, 2006): 233.

Bleeding)” is ultimately a hopeful song, both acknowledging the hung-up world and eagerly awaiting a hang-up worth having.

Appendix

“It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding)”

Darkness at the break of noon
Shadows even the silver spoon
The handmade blade, the child's balloon
Eclipses both the sun and moon
To understand you know too soon
There is no sense in trying.

Pointed threats, they bluff with scorn
Suicide remarks are torn
From the fools gold mouthpiece
The hollow horn plays wasted words
Proved to warn
That he not busy being born
Is busy dying.

Temptation's page flies out the door
You follow, find yourself at war
Watch waterfalls of pity roar
You feel to moan but unlike before
You discover
That you'd just be
One more person crying.

So don't fear if you hear
A foreign sound to you ear
It's alright, Ma, I'm only sighing.

As some warn victory, some downfall
Private reasons great or small
Can be seen in the eyes of those that call
To make all that should be killed to crawl
While others say don't hate nothing at all
Except hatred.

Disillusioned words like bullets bark
As human gods aim for their marks
Made everything from toy guns that sparks
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark
It's easy to see without looking too far

That not much
Is really sacred.

While preachers preach of evil fates
Teachers teach that knowledge waits
Can lead to hundred-dollar plates
Goodness hides behind its gates
But even the President of the United States
Sometimes must have
To stand naked.

An' though the rules of the road have been lodged
It's only people's games that you got to dodge
And it's alright, Ma, I can make it.
Advertising signs that con you
Into thinking you're the one
That can do what's never been done
That can win what's never been won
Meantime life outside goes on
All around you.

You loose yourself, you reappear
You suddenly find you got nothing to fear
Alone you stand without nobody near
When a trembling distant voice, unclear
Startles your sleeping ears to hear
That somebody thinks
They really found you.

A question in your nerves is lit
Yet you know there is no answer fit to satisfy
Insure you not to quit
To keep it in your mind and not forget
That it is not he or she or them or it
That you belong to.
Although the masters make the rules
For the wise men and the fools
I got nothing, Ma, to live up to.

For them that must obey authority
That they do not respect in any degree
Who despite their jobs, their destinies
Speak jealously of them that are free
Cultivate their flowers to be

Nothing more than something
They invest in.

While some on principles baptized
To strict party platforms ties
Social clubs in drag disguise
Outsiders they can freely criticize
Tell nothing except who to idolize
And then say God Bless him.

While one who sings with his tongue on fire
Gargles in the rat race choir
Bent out of shape from society's pliers
Cares not to come up any higher
But rather get you down in the hole
That he's in.

But I mean no harm nor put fault
On anyone that lives in a vault
But it's alright, Ma, if I can't please him.

Old lady judges, watch people in pairs
Limited in sex, they dare
To push fake morals, insult and stare
While money doesn't talk, it swears
Obscenity, who really cares
Propaganda, all is phony.

While them that defend what they cannot see
With a killer's pride, security
It blows the minds most bitterly
For them that think death's honesty
Won't fall upon them naturally

Life sometimes
Must get lonely.

My eyes collide head-on with stuffed graveyards
False gods, I scuff
At pettiness which plays so rough
Walk upside-down inside handcuffs
Kick my legs to crash it off

Say okay, I have had enough
What else can you show me

And if my thought-dreams could be seen
They'd probably put my head in a guillotine
But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only.

“Idiot Wind”

Someone's got it in for me, they're planting stories in the press
Whoever it is I wish they'd cut it out but when they will I can only guess.
They say I shot a man named Gray and took his wife to Italy,
She inherited a million bucks and when she died it came to me.
I can't help it if I'm lucky.

People see me all the time and they just can't remember how to act
Their minds are filled with big ideas, images and distorted facts.
Even you, yesterday you had to ask me where it was at,
I couldn't believe after all these years, you didn't know me better than that
Sweet lady.

Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your mouth,
Blowing down the backroads headin' south.
Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your teeth,
You're an idiot, babe.
It's a wonder that you still know how to breathe.

I ran into the fortune-teller, who said beware of lightning that might strike
I haven't known peace and quiet for so long I can't remember what it's like.
There's a lone soldier on the cross, smoke pourin' out of a boxcar door,
You didn't know it, you didn't think it could be done, in the final end he won
the wars
After losin' every battle.

I woke up on the roadside, daydreamin' 'bout the way things sometimes are
Visions of your chestnut mare shoot through my head and are makin' me see
stars.
You hurt the ones that I love best and cover up the truth with lies.
One day you'll be in the ditch, flies buzzin' around your eyes,
Blood on your saddle.

Idiot wind, blowing through the flowers on your tomb,
Blowing through the curtains in your room.
Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your teeth,
You're an idiot, babe.
It's a wonder that you still know how to breathe.

It was gravity which pulled us down and destiny which broke us apart
You tamed the lion in my cage but it just wasn't enough to change my heart.
Now everything's a little upside down, as a matter of fact the wheels have
stopped,
What's good is bad, what's bad is good, you'll find out when you reach the top
You're on the bottom.

I noticed at the ceremony, your corrupt ways had finally made you blind
I can't remember your face anymore, your mouth has changed, your eyes
don't look into mine.
The priest wore black on the seventh day and sat stone-faced while the building
burned.
I waited for you on the running boards, near the cypress trees, while the
springtime
turned Slowly into autumn.

Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull,
From the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol.
Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your teeth,
You're an idiot, babe.
It's a wonder that you still know how to breathe.

I can't feel you anymore, I can't even touch the books you've read
Every time I crawl past your door, I been wishin' I was somebody else instead.
Down the highway, down the tracks, down the road to ecstasy,
I followed you beneath the stars, hounded by your memory
And all your ragin' glory.

I been double-crossed now for the very last time and now I'm finally free,
I kissed goodbye the howling beast on the borderline which separated you from
me.
You'll never know the hurt I suffered nor the pain I rise above,
And I'll never know the same about you, your holiness or your kind of love,
And it makes me feel so sorry.

Idiot wind, blowing through the buttons of our coats,
Blowing through the letters that we wrote.
Idiot wind, blowing through the dust upon our shelves,
We're idiots, babe.
It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves.

“Advice for Geraldine on her Miscellaneous Birthday”

stay in line. stay in step. people
are afraid of someone who is not
in step with them. it makes them
look foolish t' themselves for
being in step. it might even
cross their minds that they themselves
are in the wrong step. do not run
nor cross the red line. if you go
too far out in any direction, they
will lose sight of you. they'll feel
threatened. thinking that they are
not a part of something that they
saw go past them, they'll feel
something's going on up there that
they don't know about. revenge
will set in. they will start thinking
of how t' get rid of you. act
mannerly towards them. if you don't,
they will take it personal. as you
come directly in contact face t' face
do not make it a secret of how
much you need them. if they sense
that you have no need for them,
the first thing they will do is
try t' make you need them. if
this doesn't work, they will tell
you of how much they don't need
you. if you do not show any sadness
at a remark such as this, they
will immediately tell other people
of how much they don't need you.
your name will begin t' come up
in circles where people gather
to tell about all the people they
don't need. you will begin t' get
famous this way. this, though, will
only get the people who you don't need
in the first place
all the more madder.
you will become
a whole topic of conversation.
needless t' say, these people
who don't need you will start

hating themselves for needing t' talk
about you. then you yourself will
start hating yourself for causing so
much hate. as you can see, it will

all end in one great gunburst.
never trust a cop in a raincoat.
when asked t' define yourself exactly,
say you are an exact mathematician.
do not say or do anything that
he who standing in front of you
watching cannot understand, he will
feel you know something he
doesn't. he will react with blinding
speed and write your name down.
talk on his terms. if his terms
are old-fashioned an' you've
passed that stage all the more easier
t' get back there. say what he
can understand clearly. say it simple
t' keep your tongue out of your
cheek. after he hears you, he can
label you good or bad. anyone will
do. t' some people, there is only
good an' bad. in any case, it will
make him feel somewhat important.
it is better t' stay away from
these people. be careful of
enthusiasm...it is all temporary
an' don't let it sway you. when asked
if you go t' church, always answer
yes, never look at your shoes. when
asked you you think of gene autrey
singing of hard rains gonna fall say
that nobody can sing it as good as
peter, paul and mary. at the mention
of the president's name, eat a pint of
yogurt an' go t' sleep early...when
asked if you're a communist, sing
america the beautiful in an
italian accent. beat up nearest
street cleaner. if by any
chance you're caught naked in a
parked car, quick turn the radio on
full blast an' pretend

that you're driving. never leave
the house without a jar of peanut
butter. do not wear
matched socks. when asked to do 100

pushups always smoke a pound
of deodorant beforehand.
when asked if you're a capitalist, rip
open your shirt, sing buddy can
you spare a dime with your
right foot forward an' proceed t'
chew up a dollar bill.

do not sign any dotted line. do not
fall in trap of criticizing people
who do nothing else but criticize.
do Not create anything. it will be
misinterpreted. it will not change.
it will follow you the
rest of your life. when asked what you
do for a living say you laugh for
a living. be suspicious of people
who say that if you are not nice
t' them, they will commit suicide.
when asked if you care about
the world's problems, look deeply
into the eyes of he that asks
you, he will not ask you again. when
asked if you've spent time in jail,
announce proudly that some of your
best friends've asked you that.
beware of bathroom walls that've not
been written on. when told t' look at
yourself...never look. when asked
t' give your real name...never give it.

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