

New Fiction By Matt Carney: “On Becoming,” Illustrated by milQ

written by Guest Contributor | December 27, 2017



[Image Credit: “The Musician,” by milQ, 2016, Ink and digital]

From her place pressed against her bed’s marble headboard in the dark, the musician could once again study her reflection and study herself in the recording of her final interview.

The familiar synthetic jazz, the green-purple motifs of the title sequence cast light across her face made her eyes wince. This was the recording of herself on The Peter Rhodes Show, August 27th, 2027.

She compared the two women. The first image was her on the recording opposite the infamous and ancient interviewer and his honey-wood table and black background. The second image was her in reflection beside the flat-screen television, an image from a polished mirror held out to her by a marble mermaid. Both versions of herself sat up straight, held the same serene expression, wore black muslin robes pleated around slender shoulders, gaunt pallor, shaved heads punctuated with hundreds of metallic swirled notches. From a distance, or through the compression of the recording, the notches in the scalps of the woman on the television looked like the tight nobs of hair she recalled seeing on ancient Indian statues of Buddha. But the musician knew them as they were: gold-plated quarter-inch audio connections, how she passed sound to the outside.

Blue suited Peter Rhodes read from paper before him in a melodic tenor and with slouch-faced grinning, his eyebrows like bushes above the chiseled and weathered face. “Countless accolades, a decade of artistry behind her now, my final guest has been hailed—well beyond work in her medium—hailed as the most innovative artist in living memory. Even before she... *transformed*,” he smiled

at his word, glanced across to her, back to the paper, "into her incredible technological fusion of body and instrument, she'd already written and produced four multi-platinum albums and made an indelible influence on her generation of music. But afterward came some of the most challenging work ever generated. Chris Kandmin of the San Francisco Chronicle on her new body of work; 'the first art to finally overcome the alchemy of art and speak to us *directly* from a *universal* soul.' " He met her eyes and smiled. "'The hardest working cybernetic woman in show business,' Mellony Pomené. It's wonderful to finally have you here tonight."

The image cut to Mellony: her expression was only a spacious gaze, her skin stark pallid against the pure black backdrop.

"How do you feel," he asked, "hearing all these analysis of yourself?"

She gazed.

"Being forgotten with the music?" He pushed through his own question with a laugh. "The real Mellony as the individual long overshadowed by Mellony's records?" He smiled. "Because it's embarrassing, hearing so much about yourself?"

"I..." She paused for long seconds of collection. "I don't know. I don't think of myself like that. I never thought of what I was doing—I never analyzed it, I mean." She shrugged. Her eyes fell to the table. "Should I have?"

Peter smiled. "You've done very few interviews, and something I think is a question of perpetual interest about any artist concerns impetus. What was it for you? Did other artists inspire you? Did someone push you to become up to now?"

Here, Mellony noted again how the Mellony of the recording flushed, became pink against the black backdrop. Fidgeting fingers, lips twisting. "I don't know. But I recall—an experience. With a musician. A chanteuse. Why the event mattered to me is a different question. It's not the same thing. But I'll tell you the story anyway."

She rested her elbows on the table. "When I was nine, I took a summer holiday in LA with my family—I'd been at conservatory since I was seven, and only returned to the states a few times. I thought it was miserable there in LA, so many cars, and so hot.

"So my parents brought me to a show as a surprise, this little gig in a warehouse with a wooden stage and one spotlight. I wanted to cry, standing alone in the crowd, waiting for the show with this hole in my chest, and I recall someone very petite, long black hair in a golden cocktail dress. There was something—you know, a moment: She looked me in the eyes for a long time, like, 'I see you. I understand,' then a nod. She was smiling at me, and so I smiled back. I felt better. Then she watched her shoes. I noticed she was making an effort to sit still. But then she took a deep breath, moved to the front—everyone parted without even looking at her, like she had a force. And she climbed up on the stage—everyone cheered. And then I recognized her,

finally. She was Émilie Simon of course, the chanteuse, famous in France then but not yet in the states. She was shorter than I expected from her pictures." At this point, Mellony noted the Mellony of the recording staring straight into the camera at her, or at herself. "But my god, she had these gadgets—the arm! It was copper and full of knobs and wire. She was this master of machines. She did the whole gig solo with the biggest sound ever. I was high for weeks. Émilie is the hardest working cybernetic woman in show business. Not me."

The camera cut to Peter; Mellony had been staring into it for too long.

"I don't know why—the ache. Like it was a burden to sing those songs, or a burden that they had been in her to begin with, or like she needed someone to feel the hole in her chest too—That's what I thought it was. I felt it all." The camera cut back to her, her wide eyes staring at her hands as she rubbed them constantly together. "And I met her after the show. I didn't know what to say. I was a little girl. I held out my hand and I muttered—I said, 'thank you so very much for coming to California.' ' 'twas my pleasure,' she said, so French, and she shook my hand and really shook it. Looking me in the eye, just like before. Everyone laughed at me because they thought I was shaking her hand so hard. But I will always know it was her."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "Contact. Or connection."

"I've only ever connected to one fan, you know—"

"So what about that quote, sweetheart," Peter continued, interrupting her, reaching across to touch her wrist and oblivious to the lead, "earlier, Mr. Kandmin, the 'universal soul' he mentioned? Is it an implication that we're all one? Well, I think you might say—"

Mellony muted the television; this is the point when the discussion became reductive on Peter's end and evasive on Mellony's as he struggled to define her—she really had wanted to talk about the one fan. She diverted everyone's attention to the same tired anecdotes about the music business she always used to tell when she had to tell something. Burger King burgers with Jack White in a limo. Ear piercings with the Reznors. How we all had cried for David Bowie the day he died those years ago.

Maybe there was some truth in it, though. Was it her goal? Connection? The soul singing? She lifted her hand from her lap to watch its shimmering silhouette against the television screen. She imagined the shadow the screen cast across her face from the perspective of the Mellony of the recording.

But maybe not. There were memories she wouldn't share in the interview. The impetus? The story about Émilie was important, but it wasn't the true moment.

In hindsight, it was a single decision which so blurred the past of the interview and the pasts of her life and the present of months of diamorphine-in-bed and the inalienable present, dying slowly. In 2020, Mellony's late mentor, Maria Hesto, brought her back to the studio following the Grammy

Awards after party. Mellony's band, the Sons of Sound, hadn't won anything, but she'd expected only to win nothing and drink too much, and she exceeded her expectations. It was the last time Mellony would drink too much.

Maria Hesto, the thin but determined blond who'd instructed Mellony in the Swiss conservatory, led her into the studio. The musician was draped over Maria's shoulders. Mellony's deep olive skin had flushed with red wine. She'd lost her shawl.

"My god, Meep," Mellony slurred, "we don't even know what city this—Atlanta? Lost—oh, this *is* Los Angeles. Hall of fame! Hall of fame, hall of pain!"

"I have to show you something," Maria said, pulling her into the studio. Something was draped with a black cloth in the corner beside the wall of synthesizers.

"Meep wants me to sing—hey everybody," Mellony grabbed a microphone, pulled down an invisible fedora. "Oh, why, why? *Shasha sha it's human nature, why, why—*"

"Mellony." Maria took Mellony by the shoulders. "I have to show you something."

"Oh yeah?"

"I have to show you your Valentine's Day present."

Mellony clasped her hands, sloppy slow motion. "Yes." She giggled with the sound of their mingling, shuffling feet as Maria pushed her down onto a piano bench. Before them was an upright something hidden beneath a black shroud.

"I know you've been talking a lot about needing to make something new. Really new. That the soul is too many times removed from the art."

"The record is three times removed from the soul; I feel, I think, I play, I make. Then the listener has to listen, and process. See? It's so far away." Mellony scoffed. "And who knows how far if you count the torrent files." She looked aside. Even drunk, she knew better than to confess to the other kind of distance.

"So I want to help you. I want to make you an instrument that is closer." Mellony heard a *woosh*, the sound of canvas heaping on the floor. "Open your eyes."

It was a piano of sorts, deep red with two keyboards of black keys and white accidentals like a harpsichord. "But this isn't a harpsichord."

"No." Maria stepped behind it, beaming at Mellony over the instrument through dark eyes. "It's your own custom instrument. The first of many from me. I hope."

Mellony ran her fingers across the keys. They felt smooth like dominos or ivory, but ice cold. She leaned forward, both hands on the keys of the lower

keyboard, and played Stravinsky's famous line for bassoon; *b b-c b g e b*—she recoiled. The sound of it! She played the line again, this time on the upper keyboard, accompanying it in the bass on the lower keyboard. The hollow howl of deserts and the dead. "My god, what *is this?*"

Maria couldn't contain her grin. "The lower keyboard hammers on bars of glass blown from the sands of seven deserts. And the upper hammers on honed plague bones from seven churches."

Mellony's fingers crossed the keys again, and she could see them tremble against the black. "Like... a soul celesta. But *how? Why?*"

"Listen to me Mellony: it's time to make good on your desires. Of what we can make, Mellony, we've made nothing. You're more clever than your teachers. You're fearless, Mellony. You've come this far without doubt. But we've made nothing." Maria stepped toward Mellony, setting a hand on her neck.

Then suddenly, moment of clarity, Mellony there again from her addled vantage point in the future, in bed. The intoxication had dissipated, and she recalled her own quivering voice, recalled trembling hands as Maria stood closer, closer, crawling skin.

Maria whispered into Mellony's ear. "The potter has power over her clay, yeah? But every potter uses the same clay, don't they? Let me serve you now, Mellony. I'll not rest until we succeed not at molding sound, but at true creation. The soul singing. Your soul singing. Someday."

And with her free hand, Maria ran her fingers slowly through Mellony's silk black hair, nails scratching across inches of scalp, electric pulse, eyes closing and rolling back, Maria's grip on her neck tightening and softening, tightening, softening, and Mellony murmured yes, yes, yes. Okay.

They babbled on on the TV with the audio muted in her stone room. Dark, cold marble everywhere around the stinging screen, Mellony was left to focus only on her posture in the present and her face being interviewed in the past as Peter kept touching her elbow and asking bullshit somethings about friends, about 'significant others,' parents, reactions to her becoming a literal musical instrument, implanted electrodes and wiring in her scared scalp and MIDI controller in the palm of her hand. Peter's face was seasoned, frozen with deep-rutted showbiz grinning and slouch and cheap philandering. Forever defining her, defining things, self-serving. But when the camera cut to her, the cultivated image of serenity evident in her cheeks and lips contrasted often with eyes again fluttering downward because she was as alone as she ever was and linear time would not heal any wounds and there was no control.

Mellony recalled what the Mellony of the recording recalled and withheld in the silently babbling interview, recalled the echo from the present of the icy bedroom.

Mellony didn't recall life after the operation, but on something just before.

She was twenty four in 2024, and she had just broken free from the band. Too many on-stage explosions, guitars thrown, punches thrown, storm offs—Derby Hall, April, and she'd sang just three or four songs, stormed off after smashing a wine bottle with a Les Paul, and a bad riot blew up after someone threw a pint at the band as they tried to finish without her—God help the ones who were always there, she'd thought, at every show, that little red head teen who'd followed the whole tour, the one fan. She left them and went on alone.

It was three or four in the morning, and she remained in the studio to argue about her first solo work with a lone engineer whose confidence she was crushing when another significant-other Martin-Terrance silently entered the control room.

"The mics being so close have completely blown out the timbre I was trying to capture," she hissed at the engineer.

"But Mel, can't you hear how warm it is like this—?"

"Stop, Robin. I *wanted* it to be cold. I wanted ice, goddamn it." She tapped the screen at the center of the console. She reset the enormous mixing board. Its sliders snapped to zero. Hours of work were reduced again to unity. "I wish I had known when we were recording—I trusted you. No amount of alchemy will fix it. We'll have to retrack the entire song tomorrow." She gestured widely to the board and its rows of aligned sliders. "Look: It's at zero. That means you've done nothing here."

"Mel—"

"No. Go home. Go home. Go home. It's over now."

Robin sighed, lifted his hands.

"No. Go home. *Go home.*"

He slammed the edge of the soundboard and made to leave, zipping his jacket, retrieving a cigarette—he noticed Martin-Terrance standing in the doorway and laughed. "You actually *want* to see this fucking person?" He tsked them both and pushed through the doorway.

Martin-Terrance hesitated. Mellony was standing, glaring out over the soundboard into the studio through the glass—she still hadn't noticed him. The light above drew shadows as black as her braided hair over her eyes and olive face in the reflection.

Mute, he took a seat beside the control room doorway, and he waited.

All that moved was the glint of her brooding eyes wandering the studio beyond the glass, the instruments and custom instruments propped—the soul celesta, MIDI-sense gloves and mask waiting on their black mannequin, the tablet sequencing wall—microphones standing, egg crate and tiled walls, everything

casting long, stretched shadows from the single light above.

Mellony had a militant sharpness, her hair taugt and oiled in its braid, her posture, her fit white Nehru jacket. She ran fingers across the edge of the soundboard, bringing up her open hand; she examined it, its skeletal back, its empty palm. Then she closed it into a fist and stared at her knuckles.

Melony recalled again from bed just as she had recalled then in the studio the visceral memory that always rushed back into her veins through the perfectly straight scars across her knuckles when she looked at them. It remains a memory she never told Martin-Terrance, or any other lover, or anyone.

Once, when Mellony was 15, Maria Hesto had been coaching her to play Prokofiev's Toccata in D Minor for a piano recital, and Maria finally lost her temper seven weeks into practice after she'd broken a wooden ruler across Mellony's hand and a splinter flew into Maria's eyes. Maria was so mad about the splinter that she ripped the strings from a guitar and whipped Mellony across the knuckles until she ran, screaming, tearing, torn, and hid with cellos in a closet until security guards found her the next morning. They gave up on Prokofiev after that.

Mellony wrote a letter to parents about what'd happened. But nothing changed. They never even acknowledged the event. She never mentioned it again out of fear, then resignation. Years later, in bed, she realized her letter had probably been torn to pieces.

Mellony sat back in the leather studio chair, pulled it forward to the center of the board. She touched the screen—Martin-Terrance jumped as her voice filled the control room, a smoking alto, wild but slow vibrato with—she muted it after seconds. And he heard her mutter indecipherable curses, and then he could see her posture start to wither, tiny shakes, trembling all through her body.

“Mellony—”

She turned back hard and faced him. “Oh.” And she exhaled, the energy leaving her. Then she remembered dinner. “Oh. Martin. I'm really sorry.” She sank back in the chair. “I completely forgot. I'm really sorry about that.”

He stood up. “Just come with me now. Somewhere. It's okay. I know you're busy. You forgot. But please—I've needed to ask you something—”

“I know.”

“Something important. It's been a long time. But just come with me now.”

She stared at her hand, her left hand. The knuckles again. “I know what you want to ask me.”

“Just come with me.”

She looked to the soundboard once more, the hulk of it, its dark weight, the

dark weight of the room. "I wish—" Then she looked back to Martin-Terrance, her eyes streaming. "I know. But no. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I can't stop. I've made nothing."

This is the pain which radiates as entropy from the void into the inalienable present.

Peter's question about people she loved, how they reacted—on TV she'd babbled out non-sense. She watched herself. She said they said, oh, it's insanity but we support you, oh, strange decision but we love you, oh, so on, oh, so on. She never listened to this part of the interview because it was a tight little bundle of lies. Things had happened so fast—what had she felt? Or what else had she felt?

November 12th, 2026, was her last day before becoming. It was also her birthday.

She recalled the party in her penthouse, everyone overlooking Central Park through the picture window at distant moments. She made sure to talk to each person—to hear the sound of their voices, every timbre unique—one sip of champagne for each conversation finished. She remembered the almond scent of the champagne. With each guest, she tried to read the motions of lips, the intent in their eyes, while they moved through the white lit room in gowns and kimonos and shimmering suits to wish her a happy birthday. Mellony recalled feeling the warmth and the sweat of their clasping hands, how they hugged her body close, felt the lingering hand against shoulder blade or dress strap, kissed her cheeks and lips, her breasts against their chests. She recalled holding her breath.

Everyone brought a gift; the pile beside the window with the park grew wide and tall, each box wrapped with designs. Daren Marh, her suitor at that time, stood in his white slacks and broad jacket—looking a lot like Martin-Terrance—brought Mellony the smallest gift of all, a tiny square in beige paper. Mellony couldn't remember opening any of them, not even that one.

Her champagne flute was eventually empty; she walked to Daren Marh's side, tugged his thumb as she always did, and he followed her to the picture window.

She dinged her glass. "Thank you all for coming to see me," she said to the smiling room. "It was nice to talk to you all. Thank you all for everything. But I'm very tired now." She paused. "I'll see you soon." And then she walked with Daren, brushed through the confusion into the hall, into her bedroom, shutting the door, locking it.

She led Daren into her dark marble-floored bedroom, quickly pressing her hand over his mouth. "Stop talking. Don't worry all of them." She unzipped her dress, took hold of his hands. "Just make love to me." Watched herself

undress in the mermaid mirror.

And she closed her eyes, and then it was all focus and touch: hands across her shoulders—the dress fell to the floor—hands over her neck, fingers on lobes of her ears, fingers through her thick hair, finger tips across her lips, palms across her chest, palms across her stomach, palms across her thighs, every inch of her before she had sex for the last time, slowly, riding in sync with some sort of pulse, the one that carries through when you are connected—or feel you are connected to somebody. The one that carries through when you are connected to your own body. An hour had passed into crumbled exhaustion.

He dozed for a while, and she watched. But after thirty minutes, she roused him, pulled him up, pushed him out, down the hall, his questions through the door she opened, cold on the stone floor, out the door, and locked him in the apartment hallway, the lock snapping shut, returning to the bed she'd made for herself.

In her memory as in her present, she strained to see her face in the stone mermaid's mirror on the shelf through the fuzzy sparkle of darkness, see herself disconnected from her own inner spark for the final night. An insulator—she knew that's what it was, her body. Our bodies. A chamber separating the tiny radiant that made her her, us us, from the rest of the universe, the cosmic ocean of radiation from which it had dropped. And up until then—she reassured herself and all others—up until then, until what she would create from the next day forward, artists created only as clumsy children scribble the world out in recycled crayons. They felt, then interpreted the feeling through nerves, arms and fingers onto pages as figures, rendering nothing of the feeling from the spark, the inner light. They were alone.

What would it be to feel connected after the becoming? Could she connect? She could only question herself, shiver in bed, hope that she wouldn't lose all her warmth through the holes in her head.

She watched the sun rise, and alone with the white blankets around her face, her finger tips winding absently across her skin, she wept for the last time.

With the sun, it happened fast. When she finished crying, she shaved her head and bathed. She lingered in the hot water, every inch of her body clean. Her fingers stuck to each inch of her skin and they passed over. Maria Hesto came to the door twenty minutes later in a black cloak and black beret.

The hospital—Mellony could remember nothing after the ride there. The next thing she remembered was eventually recognizing her own living room ceiling at home and Central Park through the picture window.

Her eyes were so dry once she'd become aware she was awake, she felt she'd been staring into the outside unblinking for years.

And in her room in the present again, the numbest she'd ever been, so fucked up on diamorphine as to be distant even from the necrotic void in the

inalienable present, watching again and again her ever-looping final interview with some immortal and money-grubbing, ass-grabbing misogynist to study how she *felt*, stone walls and floors, cold, dark, should she even remember what was before anymore? Nine months of drugs, of scabs, of vomit and teeth clenching, and the nothing she felt in the present, the empty, the void, had only blended with the everything of record. Mellony ran her fingertips through the grid of one-hundred-and-twenty synthetic-skin covered plugs in Melony's scalp, the analogue plumbing that leaked her to the outside.

Maria played nurse following the operation, dressing the wounds around the contact points made of gold. But even before the scabs started to itch, Maria repossessed the stiff faced instructor of Melony's days beneath her at the conservatory.

And so a new scene played each day before the camped cult of young fans outside Electric Lady Studios; two hooded women, one guiding the other out of the black limousine into the building—the other was *the* Mellony Pomené, recognizable even behind a veil of black aviators and four or more face-numbing smoothies of blackberry, diamorphine, antibiotics and vitamin C. In the first days they left the studio quickly and often, the other staring at the sidewalk. But on the fourth day of their studio visits, the other entered and did not leave.

It was around 5:30am on Friday morning, six days after she'd entered, when an engineer descended to the campers—Daren Marh was among them, hoping to learn why Mellony had vanished after her birthday party two months prior.

The engineer's eyes were a zealous blue blaze. "She wants you all to hear something new."

A buzz of energy shot through the fans.

"Follow me upstairs."

Daren followed the excited whispers of the fifteen fans. The control room was dark save for one light overhead, the enormous mixing board covered with thousands of tiny knob shadows. The studio space through the window was dark except for the red glow cast by power lights on the concave wall of small, stacked amplifiers.

Daren struggled to see through everyone's reflections in the window, but he could make out Mellony cross-legged on the floor. She was a red-hued Medusa in a pleated black robe. Hundreds of black cables sprouted from her shaved head. Daren couldn't help but keep glancing away. He noticed, too, that Maria Hesto was sitting on a stool in the corner, grinning in the dark.

The blue-eyed studio hand patched himself through to the studio. "We're ready."

Daren's eyes fell on Mellony and the faces in the glass.

She closed her eyes. There was a long silence; her expression tightened. But then, a low sort of hum began rising up through the speakers. Her expression changed; she was starting into the pain-pleasure climax, her eyebrows raised and mouth quivering—she began an involuntary sway, and then she was smiling some like she'd finally found that orgasmic hum again in a wine glass, biting her lower lip. And this was the expression accompanying the new sound issuing steadily from the speakers, which was at first like a symphony of glassy synthesizers, but soon morphed seamlessly into a wall of distinct, harmonizing voices. They each seemed to become Mellony's own voice, but with a dull sort of distorted reverb. A recitation of her own voice as she'd always recognized it in her head.

It was then the wall of voices followed the familiar opening of *The Rite of Spring*, *b b-c b g e b*, and Daren saw and heard the shock in the reflected faces as they turned with uncanny recognition upon knowing *the new*, some opening into bottomless amazement, some into fear, and three into terror—the three teens sprinted from the control room, one covering his mouth.

Daren lingered until all the fans had been excused for a word with Mellony in relative privacy. He joined her in the studio; Maria Hesto saw him enter and departed wordlessly, but with a barely contained grin.

"Mellony."

She smiled with numb recognition. "Hello. How are you?"

Daren looked to star pattern in the carpet. He ran his fingers along the edges of his pockets.

"How do you like it?"

He shook his head. "Mellony—" He met her eyes.

She was staring at him, all gleaming, wet glass.

Daren exhaled. "I have no idea, at all."

A pause. She nodded and looked away. Then a shrug.

"Why?"

Mellony shook her head. "What? Why what?"

"You were already successful. It wasn't enough to fulfill your vision? Why this?"

She met his eyes again, looking very confused. "This what? I don't know. What vision? I hadn't even thought of that question. I don't really understand."

"You're so high you can't remember."

"No, no, no, no. I just had to. I don't know. I mean, yes, but that's all

wrong. I mean, I think it's not too bad. It was the next thing to do—I mean, Maria devised it with some people, and I thought it was the next thing to do.”

“So she knew why,” he hissed.

“No, no. Hold on. Wait. We never talked about why. We just talked about doing it. And how. I don't think she knows why either, Daren.” She laughed low, slowly. “Hey. I'm fucking singing from my mind for fucksake.”

But that was it, then. Daren walked away. Set it down, like a wrong number or a wrong doorway to the wrong house—maybe one he'd walked for miles to hoping to reconnect. Confused. Violated expectations. He walked away.

She remembered laughing and crying in that moment. It didn't matter what she said. Who knows what this person had meant to her at all besides another means to feel herself?

Hold on. Hold on. Mellony raised the remote—the inalienable present again and forever—she always listened to this segment of the interview—and unmuted the sound.

“—regret? Or regrets? Maybe a difficult question, especially among artists like you.”

Here, Mellony sat up scowling as Mellony laughed on screen. “Nothing at all, Peter.” And she smiled, leaned in and moved her fingers in an invisible footed line and arch as she said the word, “Nada.” She sat back again. “See, I've always been the sort—”

And Mellony again muted the Mellony of record, scowled and scoffed at her, swore at her. “You piece of shit,” she whispered. “You coward.” She reached for the diamorphine vial, her syringe, her belt, the tools to close the distance and the time. “You coward.”

What was the question? Regret. Was that the question? Or was it what Daren Marh had walked away after asking? What was it? Why was it?

Why was what? She recalled again—she settled into another warm water high—was it one time, or was it many—it was once. It was the last show with the Sons of Sound—last time with a band. Last time with color. Mellony sat at the keyboard, the audience already swaying with the rolled rhythm of the bass—but she hesitated, staring out, frozen before striking her first chord, caught by the simplest of all questions: Why?

Mellony glanced up for a moment; the bassist and drummer were both already looking at Mellony with the same closed-mouthed, raised-eyebrow expectation. Why?

She dropped her hands to her sides. They'd repeat the same two-measure groove until Mellony decided she felt like playing and singing. It didn't matter. So

she stepped back and played nothing, crossing her arms, retreating into the hot thoughts of drifting memory.

Why didn't it matter? Maybe she should ask Maria Hesto; she'd listened to Maria for years. She'd followed Maria strictly—Mellony was just a thin seven-year-old with pox scars who couldn't communicate, handed over for Maria in the conservatory to carve her knuckles into the shape of a musician's. Mellony had never made a decision, only sucking everything in, eating albums in her free time as a teen when she could have been learning to flirt, playing guitar all day in basement bars to the impassive Europeans who knew nothing about her for a free coffee and money to buy crackers, fending off exhaustion with mouthfuls of amphetamines and the fuel of Maria's promises of a future and her punishments ensuring its misery.

But there she was, finally, firmly in the promised future, Sons of Sound, a blur of thousands more faces hopeful before her, listening. Yet it meant nothing. Why?

Maybe she should ask these boyfriends who all looked the same. Or that nameless red-headed kid in the front row, the one fan—he'd been to every show she could remember, but never asked for her autograph—The difference between the boyfriends and the kid was she exactly remembered that kid's face even between gigs, but Martin-Terrance and Daren Marh were faceless in the same blur as everyone else in her time—fans, impassive Europeans past, the groupies, men and women and others and all, she sometimes used to feel the momentary crackle of connection somewhere in her spine while she used them to climax, sometimes, all the things she had them do to keep finding it. To feel herself somewhere in the very bottom of pooled impulse. But the two men, the boy—She sang veiled versions of her real feelings to one through her eyes, but never to the others. Why didn't that matter either?

The band's last show—the band had no idea. She stepped forward again, made eye contact with that boy, finally striking the first chord, the applause crashing. He didn't smile. He didn't move. He had no motion in his face or his body. But he lit up—his eyes lit up. And he knew. He felt it. They felt. It was real. He was as lost as she'd been as a little girl, or felt as little, other, except with her. The void again. There is no control.

And then the last last show—not with the band, but the last show she played only weeks before the interview in Los Angeles. Why didn't it matter then either?

Because it was the same as it had always been. Isn't that why? The crowds—the shock was over, and they'd left. Here she is. The freak show of woman. The other. Medusa sings! They'd seen it all. Now it was only the sizable group of the deaf in perpetual awe who were unable to turn away, and the blind who'd always heard and understood her from the beginning. The ones who'd always felt it. It was real.

He was there, still, the red-head in the front row. The one fan. Only at the last last show, her body a transmitter, she was the one who couldn't see him: She had to close her eyes to pour herself out in sound for them, omni-

directional, indiscriminate. She had to close the world off and feel nothing to remain focused. She couldn't see anyone. She could only pour herself through golden plugs to the outside. So no longer could she see herself or feel herself. That's when she knew it was over.

Someone shook her foot softly; Mellony opened her eyes, and her terrified assistant hovered over the bed with her blond hair dangling, holding her hand over the holophone.

She whispered: "Mel, it's the detective again, and they're mad, and they—they still need to talk to you—*today*. They need to know—"

Mellony held her hand out, and her assistant handed the phone over. "Detective."

"Good evening, Mellony—"

"I don't care who you are. Are you recording?" She poured it out with eyes closed. "I went to her apartment on August 7th—Saturday—after the interview. Maria Hesto is the name I knew her by. I let myself in. I've always let myself in. I've known her since she was my teacher at conservatory. Look it up. I walked in through the hallway—I noticed it was cold—she always had the heat on, always really really hot, so it was strange. I called her name. I looked for her in the living room—the window was broken. And then I saw her on the couch in undergarments—she was, like, up on it, bent back and facing the ceiling with her arms—her mouth was open, like something had climbed out, like her... it looked like she'd been strangled and something climbed out, but no marks. So I called the cops, and I ran out into the hallway and sat and thought to myself until you people came. Then you came. You cleaned up. That's what happened." Mellony handed the phone back—grabbed her assistant's wrist and held it and glared into her eyes. "Fetch me another vial."

The darkness returned to her marble room as the assistant closed the door, and Mellony's eyes refocused, the TV again the only thing she could see. She lifted the remote and unmuted the Mellony of record.

"—something to tell you, though."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well—I know you mentioned this earlier—like you, this is the end for me. I'm retiring."

Peter paused. "Are you serious?"

Mellony nodded, a slight smile.

"But you're on top, now, you're moving—" He lost his composure, shifting in his seat. He pulled away from her, crossed his arms. "But-but-but you're serious? Well. But. You're serious? Retiring at 27? And...?"

“Honestly, Peter—I mean. This is it. I set out to do something, and I did it. So, I don’t know. I’m serious. This is it. This is it. I’m done now.” Then Mellony grinned for the first time in the entire interview, silent grinning right into the camera, holding the grin, holding the grin as if to laugh would kill her. “Finished.”



[Image Credit: “The Medusa,” by milQ, 2016, Ink and digital]



Matt Carney is a writer, educator and anti-educator in San Francisco. He holds an MA and MFA from San Francisco State University. His work has appeared in *A cappella Zoo*, *Inkwell*, *Transfer Magazine*, *Red Light Lit*, *Writing Without Walls*, *sPARKLE & bLINK*, and in readings at eclectic or seedy bars. His heroes are David Bowie, Ellen Ripley, and Chun Li.