

Variations on a Theme: Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands

written by Meriwether Clarke | November 16, 2015



When *Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* sauntered into my life, day-dreamy and ghost-like, I had been listening to Dylan for nearly a year and, of course, considered myself something of an expert. I had played *Queen Jane Approximately* for all my friends, cooing over the electric organ and piano riffs. I had driven to school scream-singing along to *Like a Rolling Stone* at least three dozen times. With the benign selfishness of every fifteen year old, I was certain no one else had ever felt this way before. That the man who helped shape multiple generations was somehow mine and mine alone.

Despite this rabid (and deeply irrational) possessiveness, my knowledge of Dylan was actually quite limited. *Highway 61 Revisited* was the only album I had fully listened to back to back. I completed a few cursory (pre-Wikipedia) internet searches, combed through old issues of *Rolling Stones* and discovered little beyond that his last name was actually Zimmerman and he was from Minnesota. So I returned to the stack of CDs my father had given me the Christmas before. *Blonde on Blonde* was thick, seemingly substantial. I liked the name. I liked the track listing even more— *Visions of Joanna*, *Absolutely Sweet Marie*, *Just like a Woman*. Who were these women who intrigued Dylan enough to write about them? And, I wondered without the slightest sense of guilt or irony, how could I be more like them?

Thankfully, it quickly became clear that being like Marie wouldn't serve me well (*I know you always say that you agree. Alright, so where are you tonight, sweet Marie?*) or like the questionably fictional "you" of *Just Like a Woman*. The overt sexism in many of the lyrics (particularly the latter) didn't phase me at all. His words were poetry and, at fifteen, serious literature, to me, was almost entirely made up of men misunderstanding, fighting over, criticizing, cataloging, or complaining about women.

Perhaps this was why I felt such immediate and tender relief when *Sad Eye's* lilting harmonica opening and swaying three-four groove gave way to visions of mercury and smoke and "prayers like rhymes". I certainly didn't know exactly what Dylan meant, but it was awe-filled, it was mystical, it was brimming with a type of wonder I had never heard before. By the time Dylan croaked, "Sad-eyed lady of the lowlands/ where the sad-eyed prophet says that no man comes," dreams of becoming a lesser kind of muse had vanished. No other heroine held a candle to this mythic creature, with her "hollow face" and her "gypsy hymns", and her doleful eyes "where the moonlight swims."

In retrospect, it's frustrating to admit my initial attachment to this song was because it portrayed love for a type of woman I felt some kinship to. But then I remember what it was like to be that girl. To lay in bed and wonder where my Mr. Darcy was, when my Gilbert Blythe would appear. After all, that was what every book, every movie with characters like me (bookish, ambitious)

suggested I should hope for. It was clear I was supposed to believe that discovery made great women out of smart girls. What would happen to me if I wasn't discovered?

Ironically, It wasn't until I discovered *Sad Eyed Lady* that it became a possibility that perhaps I wouldn't have to be "saved" by anyone, perhaps a different kind of love was available. A love which, in Dylan's world, was still being defined by men, but that at least championed women for being something more complicated than feisty or repressed. Though the song does its fair share of fetishizing female melancholy, there's something refreshing in how boldly it declares that there is something holy in anguish. It would take me many more years (and the discovery of music and books by people other than white men) to fully move past my antiquated idea that self-worth was meaningless until it had the validation of love. But this song was the start, if anything, for how it told me that women can be many things and be revered, that they can be sad, be heavy with grief, be wholly uninterested in transformative "discovery", and be celebrated for it.

Music can hold enormous power in memories and experiences, transporting us instantly to an age, location, or person. What sonic joys, mysteries, disbelief, and clarity have you experienced? Identify songs of influence in your life and explore them like variations on a theme, melding syntax and song structure, recalling the seriousness or levity that accompanies. Whether it's an account of when a specific song first entered your life, the process of learning to play a song, teaching someone a song, experiencing the same song in different places as it weaves through your life, unbelievable radio timing, sharing songs with those in need, tracking the passing down of songs, creative song analysis etc, I am interested in those ineffable moments and welcoming submissions of your own variations on a theme, as drawn from your life's soundtrack. Please email submissions to meganentropy@gmail.com and keep an eye out for others' [Variations](#).

("song" is a broad phrase: could be a pop song, a traditional tune, a symphony, commercial jingles, a hummed lullaby, 2nd grade recorder class horror stories, etc)