

REFLECTIONS

SOME NOTES ON ATTUNEMENT

A voyage around Joni Mitchell.

BY ZADIE SMITH



The first time I heard her I didn't hear her at all. My parents did not prepare me. (The natural thing in these situations is to blame the parents.) She was nowhere to be found on their four-foot-tall wood-veneer hi-fi. Given the variety of voices you got to hear on that contraption, her absence was a little strange. Burning Spear and the Beatles; Marley, naturally, and Chaka Khan; Bix Beiderbecke, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and James Taylor; Luther Vandross, Anita Baker, Alexander O'Neal. And Dylan, always Dylan. Yet nothing of the Canadian with the open-tuned guitar. I don't see how she could have been unknown to them—it was her peculiar curse to never really be unknown. Though maybe they had heard her and simply misunderstood.

My parents loved music, as I love music, but you couldn't call any of us whatever the plural of "muso" is. The Smiths owned no rare tracks, no fascinating B-sides (and no records by the Smiths). We wanted songs that made us dance, laugh, or cry. The only thing that was in any way unusual about the collection was the manner in which it combined, in one crate, the taste of a young black woman and an old white man. It had at least that much eclecticism to it. However, we did not tend to listen to white women singing very often. Those particular voices were surplus to requirements, somehow, having no natural demographic within the household. A singer like Elkie Brooks (really Elaine Bookbinder—a Jewish girl, from Salford) was the closest we got, though

Elkie had that telltale rasp in her throat, linking her, in the Smith mind, to Tina Turner or Della Reese. We had no Kate Bush records, or even the slightest hint of Stevie Nicks, raspy though she may be. The first time I was aware of Debbie Harry's existence, I was in college. We had Joan Armatrading and Aretha and Billie and Ella. What did we need with white women?

It was the kind of college gathering where I kept sneaking Blackstreet and Aaliyah albums into the CD drawer, and friends kept replacing them with other things. And then there she was, suddenly: a piercing sound, a sort of wailing—a white woman, wailing, picking out notes in a non-sequence. Out of tune—or out of anything I understood at the time as "tune." I picked up the CD cover and frowned at it: a skinny blonde with heavy bangs, covered in blue. My good friend Tamara—a real singer, serious about music—looked over at me, confused. *You don't like Joni?* I turned the CD over disdainfully, squinted at the track list. *Oh, was that Joni?* And very likely went on to say something facetious about white-girl music, the kind of comment I had heard, inverted, when I found myself called upon to defend black men swearing into a microphone. Another friend, Jessica, pressed me again: *You don't like Joni?* She closed her eyes and sang a few lines of what I now know to be "California." That is, she sang pleasing, not uninteresting words, but in a strange, strangled falsetto—a kind of Kafkaesque "piping"—which I considered odd, coming out of Jess, whom I knew to have, ordinarily, a beautiful, black voice. A soul voice. You don't like Joni? *I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am.*

Perhaps this is only a story about philistinism. A quality always easier to note in other people than to detect in yourself. Aged twenty, I listened to Joni Mitchell—a singer whom millions enjoy, who does not, after all, make an especially unusual or esoteric sound—and found her incomprehensible. Could not even really recognize her piping as "singing." It was just noise. And, without troubling over it much, I placed her piping alongside all the interesting noises we hear in the world but choose, through habit or policy, to separate

JOHN BROWN/JOHN

from music. What can you call that but philistinism? *You don't like Joni?* My friends had pity in their eyes. The same look the faithful tend to give you as you hand them back their "literature" and close the door in their faces.

In the passenger seat of a car, on the way to a wedding, I no longer had the excuse of youth: I was now the same age as Christ when he died. I was being driven west, toward Wales. Passing through woods and copses, a wild green landscape, heading for the steep and lofty cliffs . . . It is a very long drive to Wales. The driver, being a poet, planned a pit stop at Tintern Abbey. His passenger, more interested in finding a motorway service station, spoke frequently of her desire for a sausage roll. The mood in the car was not the brightest. And something else had been bothering me for several miles without my being quite conscious of its source, some persistent noise. . . . But now I focussed in on it and realized it was that bloody piping again, ranging over octaves, ignoring the natural divisions between musical bars, and generally annoying the hell out of me, like a bee caught in a wing mirror. I made a plea for change to the driver, who gave me a look related to the one my friends had given me all those years earlier, though this was a stronger varietal, the driver and I being bonded to each other for life by legal contract.

"It's *Joni Mitchell*. What is *wrong* with you? Listen to it—it's beautiful! Can't you hear that?"

I started stabbing at the dashboard, trying to find the button that makes things stop.

"No, I can't hear it. It's horrible. And that bit's just 'Jingle Bells.' "

I hadn't expected to get anywhere with this line, and was surprised to see my husband smile, and pause for a moment to listen intently: "Actually, that bit is 'Jingle Bells'—I never noticed that before. It's a song about winter . . . makes sense."

"Switch it off—I'm begging you."

"Tintern Abbey, next exit," he said, closed his jaw tightly, and veered to the left.

We parked; I opened a car door onto the vast silence of a valley. I may not have had ears, but I had eyes. I wandered inside, which is outside, which is

inside. I stood at the east window, feet on the green grass, eyes to the green hills, not contained by a non-building that has lost all its carved defenses. Reduced to a Gothic skeleton, the abbey is penetrated by beauty from above and below, open to precisely those elements it had once hoped to frame for pious young men, as an object for their patient contemplation. But that form of holy concentration has now been gone longer than it was ever here. It was already an ancient memory two hundred years ago, when Wordsworth came by. Thistles sprout between the stones. The rain comes in. Roofless, floorless, glassless, "green to the very door"—now Tintern is forced to accept the holiness that is everywhere in everything.

And then what? As I remember it, sun flooded the area; my husband quoted a line from one of the Lucy poems; I began humming a strange piece of music. Something had happened to me. In all the mess of memories we make each day and lose, I knew that this one would not be lost. I had Wordsworth's sensation exactly: "That in this moment there is life and food / For future years." Or thought I had it. Digging up the poem now, I see that I am, in some ways, telling the opposite story. What struck the author of "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798) was a memory of ecstasy: "That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures." The Wye had made a deep impression on him when he'd visited five years earlier. Returning, he finds that he still loves the area, but the poem attests to his development, for now he loves it with a mellowed maturity. Gone is the wild adoration: "For nature then / (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days, / And their glad animal movements all gone by,) / To me was all in all.—I cannot paint / What then I was." To be back in Wales was to meet an earlier version of himself; he went there to listen to "the language of my former heart." And though it's true that the young man he recalls is in some senses a stranger, the claim that he "cannot paint" him is really a humble brag, because, of course, the poem does exactly that. It's striking to me that this past self should at all times be loved and appreciated by Wordsworth. He under-

stands that the callow youth was the basis of the greater man he would become. A natural progression: between the boy Wordsworth and the man, between then and now. His mind is not so much changed as deepened.

But when I think of that Joni Mitchell-hating pilgrim, standing at the east window, idly wondering whether she could persuade her beloved to stop for some kind of microwaved service-station snack somewhere between here and the church (British weddings being notorious in their late delivery of lunch), I truly cannot understand the language of my former heart. Who *was* that person? Petulant, hardly aware that she was humming Joni, not yet conscious of the transformation she had already undergone. How is it possible to hate something so completely and then suddenly love it so unreasonably? How does such a change occur?

Sidebar: In 1967, another poet, Allen Ginsberg, stopped at Tintern Abbey. He had gone to Wales with his British publisher, Tom Maschler, to stay in Maschler's cottage and take acid in the Black Mountains. Those were the glory days of British publishing. Ginsberg wrote a poem about the trip, "Wales Visitation." The ground he stood on was "brown vagina-moist," and the thistles he saw had a "satanic . . . horned symmetry." In other words, he had a typical Ginsberg epiphany. I like the poem best, though, not when he's describing the things he sees but when he's examining the manner of the seeing; that is, the structural difference between how he normally sees and how he saw that day, attuned, on acid—*What did I notice? Particulars!*

This is the effect that listening to Joni Mitchell has on me these days: uncontrollable tears. An emotional overcoming, disconcertingly distant from happiness, more like joy—if joy is the recognition of an almost intolerable beauty. It's not a very civilized emotion. I can't listen to Joni Mitchell in a room with other people, or on an iPod, walking the streets. Too risky. I can never guarantee that I'm going to be able to get through the song without being made transparent—to anybody and everything, to the whole world. A mortifying sense of porousness. Although it's com-

forting to learn that the feeling I have listening to these songs is the same feeling the artist had while creating them: "At that period of my life, I had no personal defenses. I felt like a cellophane wrapper on a pack of cigarettes." That's Mitchell, speaking of the fruitful years between Ginsberg at the abbey and 1971, when her classic album "Blue" was released.

I should confess at this point that when I'm thinking of Joni Mitchell it's "Blue" I'm thinking of, really. I can't even claim to be writing about that superior type of muso epiphany which would at least have the good taste to settle upon one of the "minor" albums that Joni herself seems to prefer: "Hejira" or "The Hissing of Summer Lawns." No, I'm thinking of the album pretty much every fool owns, no matter how far from music his life has taken him. And it's not even really the content of the music that interests me here. It's the transformation of the listening. I don't want to confuse this phenomenon with a progressive change in taste. The sensation of progressive change is different in kind: it usually follows a conscious act of will. Like most people, I experience these progressive changes fairly regularly. By forcing myself to reread "Crime and Punishment," for example, I now admire and appreciate Dostoyevsky, a writer whom, well into my late twenties, I was certain I disliked. During an exploratory season of science fiction, I checked Aldous Huxley out of the library, despite his hideous racial theories. And even a writer as alien to my natural sensibility as Anaïs Nin wormed her way into my sympathies last summer, during a concerted effort to read writers who've made sex their primary concern.

I don't think it's a coincidence that most of my progressive changes in taste tend to have occurred in my sole area of expertise: reading novels. In this one, extremely narrow arena I can call myself more or less a "connoisseur." Meaning that I can stoop to consider even the supposed lowliest examples of the form while simultaneously rising to admire the obscure and the esoteric—and all without feeling any great change in myself. Novels are what I know, and the novel door in my personality is always wide open. But I didn't come to love Joni Mitchell by knowing anything more

about her, or understanding what an open-tuned guitar is, or even by sitting down and forcing myself to listen and reread her songs. I hated Joni Mitchell—and then I loved her. Her voice did nothing for me—until the day it undid me completely. And I wonder whether it is because I am such a perfect fool about music that the paradigm shift in my ability to listen to Joni Mitchell became possible. Maybe a certain kind of ignorance was the condition. Into the pure nothingness of my non-knowledge something sublime (an event?) beyond (beneath?) consciousness was able to occur.

I just called myself a connoisseur of novels, which stretches the definition a little: "An expert judge in matters of taste." I have a deep interest in my two inches of ivory, but it's a rare connoisseur who does not seek to be an expert judge of more than one form. By their good taste are they known, and connoisseurs tend to like a wide area in which to exercise it. I have known many true connoisseurs, with excellent tastes that range across the humanities and the culinary arts—and they never fail to have a fatal effect on my self-esteem. When I find myself sitting at dinner next to someone who knows just as much about novels as I do but has somehow also found the mental space to adore and be knowledgeable about the opera, have strong opinions about the relative rankings of Renaissance painters, an encyclopedic knowledge of the English civil war, of



French wines—I feel an anxiety that nudges beyond the envious into the existential. *How did she find the time?*

"On the Shortness of Life," a screed by Seneca, is smart about this tension between taste and time (although Seneca sympathizes with my dinner companion, not with me). The essay takes the form of a letter of advice to his friend Paulinus, who must have made the mistake of complaining,

within earshot of Seneca, about the briefness of his days. In this lengthy riposte, the philosopher informs Paulinus that "learning how to live takes a whole life," and the sense most of us have that our lives are cruelly brief is a specious one: "It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it." Heedless luxury, socializing, worldly advancement, fighting, whoring, drinking, and so on. If you want a life that feels long, he advises, fill it with philosophy. That way, not only do you "keep a good watch" over your own lifetime but you "annex every age" to your own: "By the toil of others we are let into the presence of things which have been brought from darkness into light." So make friends with the "high priests of liberal studies," no matter how distant they are from you. Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus, Aristotle, Theophrastus: "None of these will be too busy to see you, none of these will not send his visitor away happier and more devoted to himself, none of these will allow anyone to depart empty-handed. They are at home to all mortals by night and by day."

Well, sure—but you have also to be open to them. Because you needn't have had even a whiff of whoring in your life to legitimately find yourself too busy to visit Aristotle. Busy changing diapers. Busy cleaning the sink or going to work. And since, in the contemporary world, we have to place in "liberal studies" not only a handful of canonical philosophers but also two thousand years of culture—plus a bunch of new forms not dreamed of in Seneca's philosophy (Polish cinema, hip-hop, conceptual art)—you can understand why many people feel rather pushed for time. It's tempting to give up on our liberal studies before even making the attempt, the better to continue on our merry way, fighting, drinking, and all the rest. At least, then we have the satisfaction of a little short-term pleasure instead of a lifetime of feeling inadequate.

Still, I admire Seneca's idealism, and believe in his central argument, even if I have applied it haphazardly in my own life: "We are in the habit of saying that it was not in our power to choose the parents who were allotted to us, that they were given to us by chance. But we can choose whose children we would like to be." Early on, for better or worse, I chose whose child I wanted to be: the

NATIVITY

At the conclusion of nine months' silent communion, interrupted on occasion by long one-sided conversations of a teary and somewhat excessively candid nature, and after some very loud mutual screaming, the two were at last introduced. A shadow as of vast wings passed across them, in a manner of speaking; he slept, the small bud of face unclenched. Later on, still drowsing, he was relatively certain he had at some point overheard her claim that while nursing he never stopped staring into her eyes, which was fair enough; but when she added that she felt like she was being judged, right away he sensed things getting out of hand. That night he lay awake pondering the matter for many hours, compelled at last to find her accusation jejune, massively unsubstantiated, unwitnessed by anyone but the accuser, pathetically, and tinged with paranoia—not a trait, incidentally, you are happy to see in the person with whom you'll be sharing the next couple decades.

I have done no such thing, he concluded. In addition, while she remained perfectly free to fall in line with the mores and laws handed down by the sheep who exist, his own adamant intent was to go on waiting for word from his god, who did not. "And," he muttered irritably, "I want a harmonica."

—Franz Wright

child of the novel. Almost everything else was subjugated to this ruling passion, reading stories. As a consequence, I can barely add a column of double digits, I have not the slightest idea of how a plane flies, I can't draw any better than a five-year-old. One of the motivations for writing novels myself is the small window of opportunity it affords for a bit of extracurricular study. I learned a little about genetics writing my first novel, and went quite far with Rembrandt during my third. But these are only little pockets of knowledge, here and there. I think Seneca is right: life feels longer the more you engage with it. (Look how short life felt to the poet Larkin. Look how little he did with it.) I should be loving sculpture! But I have not gone deeply into sculpture. Instead, having been utterly insensitive to sculp-

ture, I fill the time that might have been usefully devoted to sculpture with things like drinking and staring into space.

Nowhere do I have this sensation of loss as acutely as with music. I had it recently while being guided round an underground record shop, in Vancouver, by a young man from my Canadian publishers who wanted to show me this fine example of the local cultural scene (and also to buy tickets for a heavy-metal concert he planned to attend with his wife). I wandered through that shop, as I always do in record shops, depressed by my ignorance and drawn toward the familiar. After fifteen shiftless minutes, I picked up a hip-hop magazine and considered a Billie Holiday album that could not possibly contain any track I did not already own. I was preparing to leave when I spotted an album with a

wonderful title: "More Songs About Buildings and Food." You will probably already know who it was by—I didn't. Talking Heads. As I stopped to admire it, I was gripped by melancholy, similar perhaps to the feeling a certain kind of man gets while sitting with his wife on a train platform as a beautiful girl—different in all aspects from his wife—walks by. *There goes my other life.* Is it too late to get into Talking Heads? Do I have the time? What kind of person would I be if I knew this album at all, or well? If I'd been shaped not by Al Green and Stevie Wonder but by David Byrne and Kraftwerk? What if I'd been the type of person who had somehow found the time to love and know everything about Al Green, Stevie Wonder, David Byrne, and Kraftwerk? What a delight it would be to have so many "parents"! How long and fruitful life would seem!

I will admit that in the past, when I have met connoisseurs, I've found it a bit hard to entirely believe in them. Philistinism often comes with a side order of distrust. How can this person possibly love as many things as she appears to love? Sometimes, in a sour spirit, I am tempted to feel that my connoisseur friends have the time for all this liberal study because they have no children. But that is the easy way out. True connoisseurs were like that back when we were all twenty years old; I was always narrower and more resistant. For some people, the door is wide open, and pretty much everything—on the condition that it's *good*—gets a hearing. And I am indebted to my friends of this kind who have, after all, managed to effect some difficult and arduous changes in my taste. I'm grateful for the reeducation, while still fearing that my life will never be long enough to give serious consideration to all the different kinds of wine that can be squeezed out of different kinds of grapes.

With Joni, it was all so easy. In a sense, it took no time. Instantaneous. Involving no progressive change but, instead, a leap of faith. A sudden, unexpected attunement. Or a retuning from nothing, or from a negative, into something soaring and positive and sublime. It will perhaps insult sincerely religious people that I should compare something rare and precious, the "leap of faith," to some-

thing as banal as realizing that "Blue," by Joni Mitchell, is a great album, but to a person like me, who has never known God (who has only read and written a lot of words about other people who have known God), the structure of the sensation, if not the content, seems to be unavoidably related. I am thinking particularly of Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling," and, even more particularly, of the "Exordium" ("Attunement") that opens that strange book, and which many people (including me) usually skip, in confusion, to get to the meat of the "Problemata." The "Exordium" is like a weird little novel. In it, Kierkegaard summons up a character: a simple, faithful man, "not a thinker . . . not an exegetical scholar," who is obsessed with the Biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac but finds that he cannot understand it. So he tells it to himself four times, in different versions, as if it were an oral fairy tale that mutates slightly with each retelling.

The basic details stay the same. (In all versions, the ram, and not Isaac, gets killed.) The variation exists in the reac-

tions of Abraham and Isaac. In the first iteration, Abraham, in order to preserve his son's faith in God, pretends that he, Abraham, hates Isaac and wants him killed. In the second, everything goes according to plan except that Abraham can't forgive or forget what God just asked him to do, and so all joy leaks from his life. In the third, Abraham can't believe how he can possibly be forgiven for something that was so clearly a sin. In the final version, it's Isaac who loses his faith: how could his father have considered the terrible crime, even for a moment? Following each of these retellings, there is a small paragraph of analogy to a quite different situation, that of a mother weaning her child:

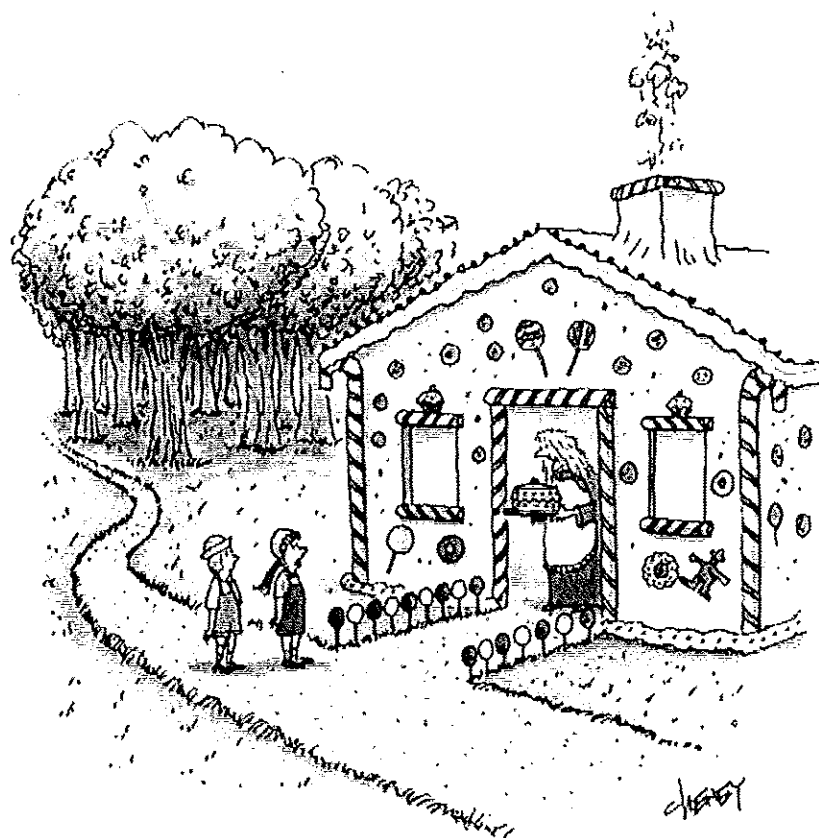
When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast. It would be hard to have the breast look inviting when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is still the same, her gaze is tender and loving as ever. How fortunate the one who did not need more terrible means to wean the child!

That's the version following the first

story, the one in which Abraham tries to take the rap for the Lord. In these peculiar breast-feeding anecdotes it is not always obvious where the analogy lies. Professional philosophers spend much time arguing over the precise symbolic links. Is God the mother? Is Isaac the baby? Or is Abraham the mother, Isaac the baby, and God the breast? I really haven't the slightest idea. But in each version a form of defense is surely offered, some kind of explanation, a means of comprehending. *It's not that my mother is refusing me milk; it's that I don't want it anymore, because her breast is black. It's not that God is asking something inexplicable; it's that my father wants me dead.* All the versions the simple man tells himself are horrible in some way, but they are at least comprehensible, which is more than you can say for the paradoxical truth: God told me I would be fruitful through my son, and yet God is telling me to kill my son. (Or: my mother loves me and wants to give me milk, yet my mother is refusing to give me milk.) And after rehearsing these various rationalizations the simple man still finds himself confounded by the original Biblical story: "He sank down wearily, folded his hands, and said, 'No one was as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?'"

When I read the "Exordium," I feel that Kierkegaard is trying to get me into a state of readiness for a consideration of the actual Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, which is essentially inexplicable. The "Exordium" is a rehearsal: it lays out a series of rational explanations the better to demonstrate their poverty as explanations. For nothing can prepare us for Abraham and no one can understand him—at least, not rationally. Faith involves an acceptance of absurdity. To get us to that point, Kierkegaard hopes to "attune" us, systematically discarding all the usual defenses we put up in the face of the absurd.

Of course, loving Joni Mitchell does not require an acceptance of absurdity. I'm speaking of the minor category of the aesthetic, not the monument of the religious. But if you want to effect a breach in that stolid edifice the human personality I think it helps to cultivate this Kierkegaardian sense of defenselessness. Kierkegaard's simple man



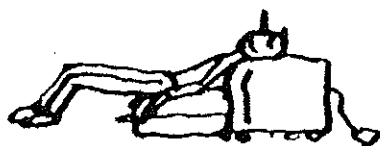
"Before we can come in, was any part of your home produced in a facility that also handles wheat, milk, nuts, eggs, or soy?"

makes a simple mistake: he wants to translate the mystery of the Biblical story into terms that he can comprehend. His failure has something to teach us. Sometimes it is when we stop trying to understand or interrogate apparently "absurd" phenomena—like the category of the "new" in art—that we become more open to them.

Put simply: you need to lower your defenses. (I don't think it is a coincidence that my Joni epiphany came through the back door, while my critical mind lay undefended, focussed on a quite other form of beauty.) Shaped by the songs of my childhood, I find it hard to accept the musical "new," or even the "new-to-me." If the same problem does not arise with literature, that's because I do not try to defend myself against novels. They can be written backward or without any "e" or in one long column of text—novels are always welcome. What created this easy transit in the first place is a mystery; I feel I listened to as many songs in childhood as I read stories, but in music I seem to have formed rigid ideas and created defenses around them, whereas when it came to words I never did. This is probably what is meant by that mysterious word "sensitivity," the existence of which so often feels innate. I feel sure that had I, in 1907, popped in on Joyce in his garret I would have picked up his notes for "Ulysses" and been excited by what he was cooking up. Yet if, in the same year, I had paid a call on Picasso in his studio I would have looked at the canvas of "Les Femmes d'Alger" and been nonplussed, maybe even a little scandalized. If, in my real life of 2012, I stand before this painting in the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, it seems obviously beautiful to me. All the difficult work of attunement and acceptance has already been done by others. Smart critics, other painters, appreciative amateurs. They kicked the door open almost a century ago—all I need do is walk through it.

Who could have understood Abraham? He is discontinuous with himself. The girl who hated Joni and the woman who loves her seem to me similarly divorced from each other, two people who happen to have shared the same body. It's the feeling we get sometimes

when we find a diary we wrote, as teenagers, or sit at dinner listening to an old friend tell some story about us of which we have no memory. It's an everyday sensation for most of us, yet it proves a tricky sort of problem for those people who hope to make art. For though we know and recognize discontinuity in our own lives, when it comes to art we are deeply committed to the idea of continuity. I find myself to be radically discontinuous with myself—but how does



one re-create this principle in fiction? What is a character if not a continuous, consistent personality? If you put Abraham in a novel, a lot of people would throw that novel across the room. What's his motivation? How can he love his son and yet be prepared to kill him? Abraham is offensive to us. It is by reading and watching consistent people on the page, stage, and screen that we are reassured of our own consistency.

This instinct in audiences can sometimes extend to whole artistic careers. I'd like to believe that I wouldn't have been one of those infamous British people who tried to boo Dylan offstage when he went electric, but on the evidence of past form I very much fear I would have. We want our artists to remain as they were when we first loved them. But our artists want to move. Sometimes the battle becomes so violent that a perversion in the artist can occur: these days, Joni Mitchell thinks of herself more as a painter than a singer. She is so allergic to the expectations of her audience that she would rather be a perfectly nice painter than a singer touched by the sublime. That kind of anxiety about audience is often read as contempt, but Mitchell's restlessness is only the natural side effect of her artmaking, as it is with Dylan, as it was with Joyce and Picasso. Joni Mitchell doesn't want to live in my dream, stuck as it is in an eternal 1971—her life has its own time. There is simply not enough time in her life for her to be the Joni of my memory for-

ever. The worst possible thing for an artist is to exist as a feature of somebody else's epiphany.

Finally, those songs, those exquisite songs! When I listen to them, I know I am in the debt of beauty, and when that happens I feel an obligation to repay that debt. With Joni, an obvious route reveals itself. Turns out that while she has been leading me away from my musical home she has been going on her own journey, deep into the place where I'm from:

For 25 years, the public voice, in particular the white press, lamented the lack of four-on-the-floor and major/minor harmony as my work got more progressive and absorbed more black culture, which is inevitable because I love black music, Duke Ellington, Miles Davis. Not that I set out to be a jazzier or that I am a jazzier. Most of my friends are in the jazz camp. I know more people in that community, and I know the lyrics to Forties and Fifties standards, whereas I don't really know Sixties and Seventies pop music. So I'm drawing from a resource of American music that's very black-influenced with this little pocket of Irish and English ballads, which I learned as I was learning to play the guitar. Basically, it was like trainer wheels for me, that music. But people want to keep me in my trainer wheels, whereas my passion lies in Duke Ellington, more so than Gershwin, the originators, Charlie Parker. I like Patsy Cline. The originals in every camp were always given a hard time.

I wonder what it will be like to hear the music of my childhood processed through Joni Mitchell's sensibility? I didn't know anything about her "black period" until I started to write this piece and read some of her interviews online, among them a long discussion she had with a Texas d.j. in 1998. Now I mean to seek out this later music and spend some time with it. Make the effort. I don't imagine it *will* be such an effort these days, not now that I feel this deep current running between us. I think it must have always been there. All Joni and I needed was a little attunement. Those wandering notes and bar crossings, the key changes that she now finds dull and I still hear as miraculous. Her music, her life, has always been about discontinuity. The inconsistency of identity, of personality. I should have had faith. We were always going to find each other.

I'm contracted for an autobiography. But you can't get my life to go into one book. So I want to start, actually, kind of in the middle—the Don Juan's Reckless Daughter period, which is a very mystical period of my life and colorful. Not mystical on bended knee. If I was a novelist, I would like that to be my first novel. And it begins with the line "I was the only black man at the party." (Laughs) So I've got my opening line. ♦