



## **HYMN** The Narcissist Cookbook

What is a ghost? That lingering, haunting, old memory that remains, a spectre of a different time. HYMN by The Narcissist Cookbook asks this question, explores this idea as he attempts to write a song, a song that he decides is how he will mourn the passing of his father.

Complete with the signature spoken word, therapeutic style singer songwriter Matt Johnston has come to be known for, HYMN is yet another instalment in the mind of a man just trying his best to understand who he sees in the mirror.

### Song142

HYMN starts simple, no big bombastic beginning or suave showmanship, but instead an understated realism, a recording complete with

audible breaths and the turning of pages as Matt toys around with his guitar, uttering but a single, rushed line. *We walked into the fields.*

It's a small song, nothing on its own, a demo, a first thought without any explorations, Song142. To this regard I believe it does its job perfectly, setting up the themes and tone of the album, however I would never dare to listen to it on its own, without the rest of the songs to back it up.

## UNWELCOME GUESTS

A ringing phone cuts off Song142, and a conversation begins, a voicemail, perhaps. Poetic speech sets the scene of someone in mourning, keeping their home dark and welcoming, in the hopes that they would be ghosted. Perhaps this is Matt, perhaps it is a friend, perhaps his father. It is unclear, but it gets its message across. This is someone who is missing, who is playing their father's records and smoking his pipe in the hopes that they will get to see him even one more time. The voicemail ends.

Matt never believed in ghosts. A sad piano plays a simple tune throughout the whole track, while Matt explains a philosophical idea, another trademark of his, about emotions and how we leave them in our wake. He is explaining ghosts, the memories in familiar spaces. Perhaps that is what the voicemail is, a memory, lingering like a ghost. Matt is taking the train home, to catch the ferry at Ardrossan Harbour, where he grew up by the sea, remember this, it doesn't seem important but I believe it is. I don't know who this song is for, but it has been six years since they passed, and Matt is reflecting on seeing them wave from their flat at the passing train. Six years and it still lingers.

Here comes the gut punch though, as Matt says he is going home for Christmas, where there has always been many people to celebrate, sometimes this person was even there, but *always* him, his mother and father. There will only be two people this year, for the first time in his 31 years of life. His father has passed, and he likens the retracing of the memories like following tracks, this train of memories that has been mentioned throughout the song. Those memories, he says, are like 100,000 unwelcome guests.

The song ends with Matt repeating that he doesn't believe in ghosts, but it doesn't matter, because he is about to learn what it feels like to be haunted.

### Receiver Demo

Steady breathing, a strumming guitar. After a moment, Matt sings the lines he wrote after song142's 'we walked up into the field'. They say some places are graves that haven't been done, and that they 'carried you high on our shoulders'. It is clear this is a funeral, and the guitar strums harder. This song has many themes of evolution and time, talking about humans walking from the ocean, to Centurians guarding a cross.

Receiver is still messy, but it's sounding more like a song now.

### Human Design

Human Design starts with a steady marching beat, immediately setting a building, serious tone. The song talks about seeing a shadow glance across the moon, perhaps like seeing a fleeting ghost. A chant begins, 'This is not of human design'. An electric bass comes in, meeting the marching tone along with many more percussive instruments. The song overall is rather repetitive, with clunky lyrics, but these faults are saved as the marching swells, and the lyrics sing 'Can you call it a nightmare if it outlasts the night'. It speaks of something moving out there, beyond the treeline. It is clear this is another song about ghosts and morning.

A cloaked figure is described reaping crops and climbing up a hill to Matt, and I believe this woman is none other than death, coming to kill him. Death is not of human design.

### Receiver Of Wreck (FINAL)

A cleaner version of Receiver Demo, this song is more of a whisper, no breathing, with lots of instruments. It is almost overproduced, obsessively so.

It almost feels overworked into losing some soul, but when the song enters its musical interlude, I can't deny the feeling of the music washing over me.

We get past where RecieverDemo ended, and Matt sings to us an integral line 'I've tried so hard not to finish this song, but here we are, eight bars to go'. It is clear this song is important to him, and while part of him just wants to finish it, another isn't ready to let it go.

## MATADOR

Windchimes. This is one of Matt's signature spoken word songs, and possibly my favourite on the album, with its sadness and self reflection.

It speaks of a conversation he had with his father shortly before his passing. Matt says he asked him how he dealt with his own father's death, and he replies 'Parents die Matt, it's what they do, that's what they've always done'. Acapella comes in as Matt reflects that he could tell there was more, but didn't ask, and when the song kicks in, he delivers a simple line, innocuous and inconsequential, this line is my favourite on the album.

'I think he was like me...'

Matt describes that both him and his father have a tendency to sidestep the big, scary things like a Matador. Sending those things into a twisting vault beneath, trapping them. It's who Matt is by default, he learned it from his father.

Matt admits that The Narcissist Cookbook is meant to oppose that impulse. It is a place where you don't run from the monsters, where you don't lock them away. It is a place to try and understand them.

The song fades away, replaced with a new one, with steady waves and a simple melody, about a beachcomber who doesn't want to come home until he has found something. I think this is about Receiver of Wreck, the obsessive searching, that grass is greener attitude. This is backed up by Matt promising himself one more go around at the song, while the beachcomber sings about trying to find something perfect.

The song ends how it began, windchimes, this time accompanied by waves. I believe this is important to the album, so let's remember it, too.

## The Blue Moon After Next

A soft guitar starts this song, like many others, but this one has a more slow, sombre vibe. It speaks of winter coming in, shorter days, paler skies. He's coming home soon, the blue moon after next.

Matt sings about bolted doors and shadows in the night, referencing both MATADOR and Human Design, as well as UNWELCOME GUESTS when he mentions the pov character of the song's voice being heard in the creaking floorboards.

With the way it is written, I believe this song is from the perspective of a ghost, possibly Matt's own father, saying he will return soon. It's almost like a plea from Matt himself, a want to see his father again.

The singer is the thing whispering through the keyhole and outside the upstairs window, who will disappear if they aren't welcome (Like in unwelcome guests).

## Receiver Of Wreck (FINAL ACTUAL)

This version of Receiver Of Wreck starts much more upbeat, sung confidently, with an entirely different vibe. It feels filled with emotion, belted out as Matt once again sings about a funeral. This time however, a chorus has been added, saying 'we are letting you go'. It talks about people gathering and dancing in the mud, and it is clear that this is still a song of mourning, but in a joyous way, a celebration of life, the toast at the funeral. Though happier than all the other versions, I see this as the most emotional version of Receiver Of Wreck, powerful and celebrated.

## PHYLACTERY

Phylactery, like other songs on HYMN, doesn't start with music. Instead, a safety announcement welcomes a crowd aboard a vessel. Matt cuts in,

talking over the announcement to talk about how sometimes the amount of time and effort put into a project will make it amazing, and how this is not one of those times. He sounds angry, defeated, as he admits how tired he is of this song. Yet he isn't ready to let go.

PHYLACTERY is an interesting song on the album, it is the first time Matt formally admits that Receiver Of Wreck was meant for his father, not just that, but it was meant to be how he mourned, entirely. When he started, he thought it would be helpful, even saying he thought he would be able to bring something beautiful back to show everyone (like the beachcomber blues in MATADOR), and then he wouldn't have to feel like this anymore.

He says that the very first demo was created two years ago, the mourning before the funeral, and goes on to share that he was writing it during the service. Once again referencing MATADOR, Matt believes he was dissociating as to avoid the monster barreling towards him, the grief of his father's passing.

Once again, just as he did in UNWELCOME GUESTS, Matt tries to use philosophy and psychology to explain what is going on, even though Human Design tells him it might not be explained. He explains a theory wherein if emotions are energy, then they cannot be created nor destroyed. If that is the case, he wonders, where did his emotions go when his father died: Receiver Of Wreck. He doesn't even see it as a song any more, calling it an 'external hard-drive' for his ugly feelings. So long as he keeps working on the song, he won't have to feel his grief, the ghosts will never haunt him, until one day he 'will forget what he walked up into the field to bury'.

This is a spoken word track about a man trying with all his might to understand grief, instead of facing it and being in it, and it feels *so real*. PHYLACTERY is on a different level from the other tracks, there are no double meanings, no musical sidestepping, just The Narcissist Cookbook doing what it was designed to do, and facing down the monsters.

## Receiver Of Wreck

Receiver Of Wreck is never *really* finished, and the final song of the album proves it, starting once more with the sounds of Matt preparing to play. The lyrics are completely different now, too, no more walking up into the field, it's all different, that old version forgotten, just as PHYLACTERY predicted.

In this version, Matt is speaking directly to his father about a dream he had six months after the funeral. He dreamt of seeing his father at the old pier, which I personally believe has been set up by UNWELCOME GUESTS mentioning his childhood by the sea, and MATADOR's recurring themes of the ocean with windchimes, waves, and beachcombers.

He watches his dad, who is oblivious to his son nearby, and tries to fight the urge to run up and hug him. Weakly, the lyrics fall into Receiver Of Wreck (FINAL\_ACTUAL)'s chorus, as Matt's trembling voice sings 'I'm letting it go'.

When he realises he is about to wake up, Matt yells out to his father, and oh boy if you hadn't cried yet, this will get you for sure. He asks 'Am I ever gonna see you again?'

Matt wakes up, mad at his father for the answer, mad at himself for projecting onto a dream. 'No, probably not'.

Receiver Of Wreck is a quiet whisper, a hurting that has been bubbling throughout the whole album, but has only been able to come forth here, Matt's best attempt to feel his feelings. It gets easier with time, grief, but it never truly goes away, it always hurts, those ghosts are always there, the energy is never destroyed.

Then Matt switches from his lone guitar to a piano, playing a simple, melancholic melody as the ambient noises of his studio hum in the background. There are no lyrics, just a slow, sad song that forms the kind of silence you don't realise has been missing. Matt isn't talking anymore, he isn't trying to rationalize or explain, he is just facing these feelings head on.

There is no resolution to HYMN, instead, its final track stops short, unfinished, its last sound a lone page turning, cut off before the next sheet of music is reached.

Receiver Of Wreck will never be finished, and grief will never go away, but maybe that's ok.

## *Afterward.*

The following are a collection of thoughts written down live after my second ever listen through of this album. These have been included as a tribute to the all the messy sides of things, I hope you enjoy - Nicholas Harris-Whittle

### **Song142**

Starts with the shift of paper as he puts his sheet music up. He starts strumming and humming, getting more confident as he goes. Sings 'You walked up into the fields'

### **UNWELCOME GUESTS**

Starts with a phone ringtone. Picks up and he is talking to someone, as an answering machine. I think it's about the protag talking to a friend about their own dad's death. Simple piano plays in the bag. No wait, he calls the person Matt, so maybe he is playing a friend leaving a voicemail for himself.

Apparently Matt tried to make his home welcoming for ghosts, hoping to be haunted.

The voicemail ends, and he says he never believed in ghosts. Then he talks about wishing to see his dad wave at the passing train again.

He talks of the philosophical theory in which emotions inhabit a physical space, and are shed from people. The same piano from the voicemail has been playing, but not distorted anymore. Matt theorizes that this concept is what is happening at the train, and that he is feeling the emotions.

He says that he is going home for Christmas (to the audience) for the first time since his dad died. He says he spent 31 consecutive christmases there, and that this time will be the first with only two people in it. Calls back to train metaphor, trundling on rails retracing footprints in the carpet from old memories and thoughts like the emotional ghosts concept.

But he isn't certain, he says he doesn't know at the end, saying the unwelcome guests are all the memories crammed into the corridors. He repeats he doesn't believe in ghosts, but that doesn't matter, he doesn't think you (his dad?) did either, but he is about to feel how it feels to be haunted.

### **ReceiverDemo**

Heavy breathing plays over the starting cords. "We walked up into the field" and other lines.

Once again gets more confident as the song continues. Cords are strummed harder, the voice, while still soft, grows in volume.

Coming from the ocean, graves that haven't been dug, some plots reserved since the beginning of time or before. Carried you on our shoulders. This song seems partly about evolution and the evolution of humanity (stone rolled into place to centurions. An army of lycan moss), and party about burying his father.



Cords get very loud by the end, as he puts a bunch into it.

### **Human Design**

Shoop.

This. Is. Not. Of. Hu. Man. Design.

Marching tempo almost. Carries the trademark belting feel, but the lyrics are a bit clunky, perhaps intentional, perhaps not?

(Can you call it a nightmare, if it outlasts the night? There's something out there past the treeline. A hooded figure come to harvest all the wheat she harvested last year? (God? Reaper) She is climbing up the hill to me) Is this about mourning? About the ghosts?

### **Receiver Of Wreck (FINAL)**

Starts confident this time. No breathing, it's polished. There is a feint, crunchy monologue in the back. The guitar is less heavy, and instead accompanies more. It has many little facets, like a finished song, but does it crowd?

Feels like a Narcissist Cookbook song, though, with the a-cappella and the many other flourishes like the self harmonies, percussion style.

Then it crushendos, everything goes away but the guitar and a shaker (and some a-cappella) as he says he has tried so hard not to finish this song. 8 bars to go, then it's time.

He says 'i don't know at the end of this one as well, sincere, no music)

Like finishing this song finishes his mourning

### **MATADOR**

Wind chimes. He talks about him asking his dad about how he had dealt with his own father's death. His dad says 'dunno, just did. Parents die, Matt, that's what they do, what they've always done.'

Matt could see there was more, but his father wasn't up for sharing.

Base comes in to join a cappella when he says he and his dad were the same. They sidestep scary things like a matador. Talks about the thing tumbling into the deep maze-like vault that you trap them in.

Matt says that's how he is by default, learned from his father.

Matt says the Narcissist Cookbook is an attempt to counterbalance that impulse. It's a reminder to not lock the scary things away, bulls, ghosts, dragons. "We don't run from these things here"

He says that ideally we don't even fight them, we just see them, look directly at them.

Song segways into beachcomber blues.

Maybe this is a failure to face problems directly?

The beachcomber won't go home until he finds something worthy of you(?). Like working on the song to perfection I think.

Matt interjects, saying he can hear the bull down in the dark, and he needs to go there soon.

The song's almost finished, just one more go round.

Matt says "just one more", almost defeated in how he says it.

Ends with waves and wind chimes.

### **The Blue Moon After Next**

Guitar fades in. Talking about winter? Days getting shorter, wind howling. He writes his name in sycamore, signs with a kiss, he's coming home soon, the blue moon after next. Is this another one about finishing the song, and how that finishing is always in the future.

Mentions a bolted door?

Says he's the thing that stands outside the door and whispers through the keyhole. The face you can't see outside the upstairs outside window (too much of a stretch to say like his dad with the train?). This means this song is from the perspective of a ghost maybe? So is it saying his dad will come home after the song is done?

### **Receiver Of Wreck (FINAL\_ACTUAL)**

Completely different vibe. More fun, guitar becomes percussion, instead of singing sadly, he sings with more of a smile in his voice. Acapella and other instruments also seem more happy, in that bittersweet way. New lyrics I think? About dancing around in the mud, cackling nightmarish beasts.

The people of this world have no words to describe us. We present you to the infinite sky, carry you high on our shoulders.

"We are letting you go" in a happier tune

This is about the funeral, perhaps the funeral party, the celebration of life. It's a very energetic song. New instruments here too I think, and less cluttered.

### **PHYLACTERY**

Starts with an announcement of welcome to this vessel.

Matt cuts in, talking about Leonard Cohen putting in so much effort to write Hallelujah. This is not one of those times when the length of time equals quality.

He is done with this song, but he isn't ready to let it go. This song was for his dad. It would be where he digested all those emotions at once.

He dives in, talking about being smug (Matt struggles with self hate)

The first demo was recorded on his phone before the funeral, and he was writing it during the funeral. He says it's dissociation, when we can't bear to look directly at the monster barreling out of the dark at us.

He says that if emotions are energy in the brain, then energy can't be created or destroyed.

He didn't cry when his father died, so where did those emotions go?

Receiver of Wreck. He thinks it's not just a song, but an external harddrive for the feelings he can't bear to have close to him.

He won't have to face those emotions if he keeps working on the song.

He talks about walking up into the field to bury something (his dad)

It has been 2 years of writing, and the song will never feel complete, one day he will just have to stop.

But he's in too deep to just walk away. He doesn't get to feel like it's done until all the emotions are released. Maybe then he can start to actually gather those emotions. Finding a place for them in himself, where they belong.

## **Receiver Of Wreck**

Starts with a shaky breath and a page turning.

Six months after you died I dreamt that I saw you. It's at a named pier, so proolly important. Dad is staring out at the water, and doesn't see Matt, who is fighting the urge to run up and hug you.

Sings: Letting it go, I'm letting it go.

Page turning

He feels himself waking up, so he yells out "am I ever gonna see you again" Dad says "No probably not"

Matt wakes up mad at dad for the answer, mad at himself for projecting weight onto this dream (Just like the song methinks)

He sounds so broken, singing that he's letting it go.

It's all in the same chord progression, but this is much less designed, just him and his guitar.

Sounds of him moving, and he's playing a new tune on a piano. There's ambient noise of some kind, but the piano is all that matters right now, a slow melody, with strange pauses, like he's unsure or trying things out. The melody ends, and there is ambient noise, until he turns the page and the song cuts abruptly.