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"Tuned every ear towards a tiny lengthening of light"

Listening for Weak Hope in John K. Samson's *Winter Wheat*

On his most recent solo album, *Winter Wheat* (2016), Winnipeg singer-songwriter John K. Samson lingers in the liminal space between despair and hope, locating a fragile fecundity in the dormant growing season evoked by the album's title. *Winter Wheat* voices a series of missed connections, unfinished stories, and interrupted conversations that cycle through many registers of despair before partially resolving into the tenuous hope that, as Samson writes in the title track (borrowing from Miriam Toews' novel *A Complicated Kindness*), "this world is good enough, because it has to be." Rather than advocating for complacency, Samson's songs perform a painful recounting of the past in order to imagine the troubled present as a time of tentative potential: though the world is not and has not been "good enough" as it is, still, to quote the title track, we must "salute the ways we tried, [and] find a way to rise" ("Winter Wheat"). I posit *weak hope*, which I characterize as a combination of resignation, optimism, and generative delusion, as a productive framework through which to listen to Samson's dense, richly allusive song lyrics. In turn, I suggest that listening closely to Samson's lyrics offers up a kind of weak, tenuous hope for the listener. In our increasingly fractured political times, learning to listen attentively, empathetically, and equitably—listening to *weaker* or marginalized voices, in particular—is an urgent imperative. Though we may not know exactly "what survival means" ("Confessions of a Futon Revolutionist," *Fallow*), to use the words of artist Jenny Holzer that Samson quotes in

Winter Wheat's album liner epigraph, listening to, for, and with *weak hope* in *Winter Wheat* might model some collaborative "way[s] to survive."

Many narrators on *Winter Wheat* struggle with a central *agon* that feels very contemporary: when action is likely futile, should we act anyway? In the face of late-stage capitalism, climate change, relentless technological advancements, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global rise of far-right neo-fascist nationalisms, how do we locate hope? Is it *too late* to be hopeful? Samson's songs urge that we "recommit [ourselves] to the healing of the world" and "pursue a practice that will strengthen [our] heart[s]" ("Postdoc Blues," *Winter Wheat*). For the attentive listener, the very act of engaging with Samson's politics and poetics of weakness can form part of a practice that "strengthen[s our] heart[s]," by listening closely and imaginatively to the radical, unflinching empathy modelled in his precise, demanding song lyrics. Learning to listen for scraps of weak hope might just allow our splintered selves—"proud and strange and so hopelessly hopeful" ("Exiles Among You," *Left and Leaving*)—to begin to "tune" ("Winter Wheat") to one another.

Both weakness and hope are recurrent tropes in Samson's writing; the weakness of hope and the hopeful potential inherent in (mis)perceived weakness are equally audible in his lyrics. Over the course of the four albums he released with his former band The Weakerthans between 1997 and 2007, Samson theorized the latent political power of people, animals, and objects considered not only weak, but comparatively *weaker-than* others. According to Samson, the band's name emerged from "a few places" (see Todd). The first is a line from the 1992 film *The Lover* (based on Marguerite Duras' 1984 novel of the same name): when a character is challenged to a bar fight, he responds, "Go ahead, I'm weaker than you can imagine." The second, as quoted in the Weakerthans' song "Pamphleteer" (*Left and Leaving*), is a nod to what Samson calls Ralph Chaplin's "old union hymn," "Solidarity Forever": "What force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one?" In both quotations, the speaker invites the auditor to begin to internally articulate not only weakness, but the weaker-than: if the character in *The Lover* is "weaker than [we] can imagine," how do we imagine weakness? Is weakness merely the absence of strength? The name "The Weakerthans" evokes similar questions: what are the politics inscribed in the ways in which weakness is constituted? Who benefits from upholding conventional hierarchies that range from strong, to weak, to the *weaker-than*? What might happen if everyone deemed *weaker-than* were to band together? Rather than staging a countercultural celebration of true weakness, therefore, Samson's writing

critiques commonly held conceptions of strength—including masculinity, capitalism, anthropocentrism, and nationalism—and advocates for radical, collective, *weak hope*.

My articulation of weak hope is inflected both by contemporary theories of complex, even contradictory affects, and literary and musical evocations of troubled feelings. Miriam Toews' titular *A Complicated Kindness* and Montreal band Stars' invocation to "take the weakest thing in you / and then beat the bastards with it" ("Hold On When You Get Love and Let Go When You Give It," *The North*), for example, sound as loudly in my thinking as critical voices including Lauren Berlant's and Sianne Ngai's. *Weak hope* is particularly conversant with Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007). In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant asks why, when confronted with political or personal "situations" (5) that are clearly detrimental, we adapt rather than revolt. For Berlant in this regard, optimism is both inherently destructive, in that it contributes to the preservation of a status quo that functions as an "obstacle to flourishing" (1), and necessary to survival. Optimism, she argues, "makes life bearable [even] as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (14). In *Ugly Feelings,* Ngai probes the tension between staying hopeful enough about life to want to survive, but not so blithely optimistic that we ignore the political imperative to make a better world. Ngai also critiques Adorno's description of the perceived "powerlessness and superfluity" of art (and, of course, Adorno was even more scornful of popular music), suggesting that literature's own awareness of its *weakness* is "precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness" (2). *Weak hope* seeks a middle ground between optimism and ambivalence, listening to how the *weaker-than* literary genre of song lyrics might tentatively rehabilitate people, places, and things considered powerless. In an interview with *Geist* magazine, Samson suggests

> There is a lot of potential in places that are removed from the centre of power. . . . I have this feeling that that's where a lot of interesting things are going to emerge—things that have the potential not to be sullied or defeated as soon as they're created. They can be ignored for a while. They can hover in between. (Tough)

In my close reading of and listening to Samson's work, I primarily take my language for *weak hope* from his writing itself, allowing lyrics to provide "new words for old desires" ("Left and Leaving"). In this paper, I re-listen to Samson's body of songs in concert with *Winter Wheat,* tracing the tropes of technology, survival, loss, faith, mental illness, nostalgia, cities, and ecology.

"A lonely line of buildings you can block out with your thumb": Touching the City

On Samson's first solo LP, *Provincial* (2012), he set out to give voice to the ghosts, living and dead, that haunt the roads of Manitoba. Constructed as a sonic roadmap, *Provincial* navigates both meanings of its title: the roads that branch through the province of Manitoba, and the parochial, non-metropolitan undertones of the adjective. *Provincial* holds steady as a cohesive piece of work with its driving compass returning "home" in the final track, matching the illustrated aerial maps of roads through wheat fields depicted in its album art. *Winter Wheat,* however, is more disjointed and expansive—Samson regularly refers to the fifteen-song album as "a bit of a sprawler" (qtd. in Lebar). This expansiveness is reflected in the album's cover art, which consists of an abstract wash of blues extracted from the foreboding prairie clouds in Winnipeg artist (and Samson's uncle) David Owen Lucas' 2009 painting *Grand Valley.* Instead of finding a road leading home, the dislocated protagonist in the title track begs the auditor to "allow the hope that we will meet again out in the winter wheat. Find me in the winter wheat." Whereas *Provincial* tracks the roads and highways of Manitoba, the characters voiced on *Winter Wheat* have been metaphorically driven off of their paths; while *Provincial*'s narrators drive to or away from their objectives, the narrators of *Winter Wheat* are unanimously lost.

Samson's lyrics return, again and again, to his hometown of Winnipeg. There are three major tropes in Samson's lyrics about Winnipeg: buildings, roads, and wheat. The cover of The Weakerthans' debut album, *Fallow,* is comprised of layered images of two of these tropes: a sepia-toned piece of wheat superimposed over a faded map of Winnipeg. *Fallow*'s album cover is especially anticipatory of the themes of both *Provincial* and *Winter Wheat*. In the nearly twenty years between *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat*, Samson has not strayed far from locating weak hope in images of unlikely growth, with the real and metaphorical crops on both *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat* tentatively promising future harvest. Further connecting the two albums' titles, winter wheat is often planted as a cover crop, which prevents soil erosion while neighbouring fields lay fallow (see Clark, *Managing Cover Crops Profitably*). Laying a field fallow and planting winter wheat are intended not only to preserve and protect what is already present in the field, but also to optimize the soil for future growth. Though fields that are fallow or planted with winter wheat may appear to be less valuable, or weaker than other crops, they are integral to the long-term survival of the farmland.

In the title track of *Winter Wheat*, the narrator takes a similarly long view of their city and the fields that surround it. Resetting a scene from the opening of Miriam Toews' novel *All My Puny Sorrows*, the song begins with the dislocated narrator staring back at Winnipeg over fields of winter wheat: "So make a visor with your hand and squint at where you're from, a lonely line of buildings you can block out with your thumb." In this image, Samson endows the smaller, *weaker* body of the narrator with the ability to physically "block out" the much larger entity of their hometown, playing with the power dynamics of perspective. From far away, uniquely vertical amongst vast fields of wheat, Winnipeg appears "lonely" and small, mirroring the speaker. Between the two living bodies, the speaker and the city, are acres of wheat that are touched only by the "wind throw[ing] patterns on [the] field[s]." With a small hand movement, Samson impossibly elongates the narrator's tactile relationship to their city. Like the wind "throw[ing] patterns" and the "sun selecting targets for the shadows to attack," the speaker flattens the entire city by blocking the vertical lines of buildings with their thumb.

The narrator's distant perspective on Winnipeg in "Winter Wheat" echoes the position of the speaker in "Highway 1 West," a song on *Provincial*, who envisions the city's "lonely line of buildings" as "some cheap EQ with the mids pushed up in the one long note of wheat." For the speaker in "Highway 1 West," who is stuck on a remote highway from where it is "too far to walk to anywhere," the skyline of Winnipeg resembles the audio frequency line of an equalizer (EQ) on a sound system with the "mids pushed up." The "mids" are the mid-range of the song, usually including the vocal tracks, so pushing up the mids increases the volume of the vocals. Mapped onto an otherwise flat prairie landscape, the city not only graphically resembles a line of audio frequency with its "mids pushed up," but also enacts the sounds evoked by this image: a city is a gathering of many voices, a chorus made louder, though no less lonely, in their multitude.

Pushing up the "mids" on an EQ and "mak[ing] a visor with your hand " are both tactile images, in which the speaker changes their perspective on the city by touching it, even at a remove. For Samson, the city and the body are always linked; in one of his most famous lines, for example, which is based on a line by Winnipeg poet Catherine Hunter, the narrator of "Left and Leaving" sings: "My city's still breathing (but barely, it's true) through buildings gone missing like teeth" (*Left and Leaving*). Connecting the human body and the body politic, Samson endows the city with anthropomorphized

agency, wherein it looks, listens, and breathes back at its inhabitants ("but barely, it's true"). The city, for all of its mass, is still a weak, "lonely" entity that feels the wounds its inhabitants inflict upon it. For Samson, the city is late and moribund, kept alive only by a weak, latent hope: if the city is alive, it too might learn to listen.

In the title tracks from both *Fallow* and *Winter Wheat*, hope is found on the margins of the city, in the wheat fields that surround it. In "Fallow," the speaker invites his companion to step an appropriately funereal distance of "six feet off the highway, our bare legs stung with wheat," in order to "dig a hole and bury all we could not defeat." Though burials are usually imbued with finality, rereading "Fallow" in the context of "Winter Wheat" might allow us to recast this interment as, instead, a planting: the weak, late offshoots of the narrator's despair sprouting nearly twenty years later in "Winter Wheat." Though "Fallow" ends with a desire that seems destined to be frustrated—to "stay for one more year" even though "the lease runs out next week"—the speaker in "Winter Wheat" is, somehow, still there, sleeping in a "parking lot, air-mattresses gone flat." Like several other songs on *Winter Wheat*, there is comfort, and even hope, to be found in the unlikely act of survival.

In the second verse of "Winter Wheat," the persona reveals their vision of tenuous, future-oriented hope, which they locate in the small stalks of wheat growing around them. Entreating the auditor to join them "out in the winter wheat," the narrator describes their surroundings: "This crop withstood the months of snow, the scavengers and blight, tuned every ear towards a tiny lengthening of light, and found a way to rise." Samson's use of the word "tuned" and pun on the "ear[s]" of wheat transposes the natural image of growing wheat stalks turning to follow the sun into an image of purposeful, musical movement. Tuning is a precise, deliberate motion, wherein one attempts to bring all of the separate notes or strings of an instrument into close harmony with one another. Like the focus of Samson's songs, tuning is both aural and tactile, using the "ear" to hear the desired note, and hands and fingers to adjust the strings' relative tension. Tuning is also fundamentally relational: not only must each string be in tune with the next, but each instrument in a band or orchestra must tune to each other. In this line, Samson endows the wheat fields with agency, rendering them, like the city they surround, ripe for comparison to the humans that live between and amongst them. If winter wheat crops can "find a way to rise" in tune with each other, perhaps listeners can attune their ears more purposefully towards

one another. Rather than speaking, which is often associated with strength and power, metaphorical harmony might be found instead through a *weaker* form of engagement: attentive, empathetic listening.

"This hashtag wants me dead": Technologies of Self

While Samson's writing retains a cautious hope that humans may find ways to retune ourselves with nature, non-organic sounds of technology are frequently configured as atonal barriers to the dream of harmony. In "Fallow," for example, "radiators hum out of tune"; in "Stop Error" (*Provincial*), the speaker is "trying to ignore the theme that keeps repeating from Call of Duty 4" while surrounded by the "wheezy breath of cooling fans and hard drives"; and in "The Prescience of Dawn" (*Reconstruction Site*), the narrator decides to "[t]une the FM in to static, and pretend that it's the sea." Samson, who no longer participates in any social media, even going so far as to conduct press interviews via postcard, worries that technologies are "advancing so swiftly [that] they . . . have in some ways overtaken us" (Chandler). Several tracks on *Winter Wheat* meditate on Samson's anxieties about technologies: "Carrie Ends the Call" reimagines Neil Young's "Motion Pictures for Carrie" in the context of a failing long-distance relationship conducted primarily over glitching video-sharing platforms; "Select All Delete" opens with the line, "That hashtag wants me dead"; and "Postdoc Blues" attempts to console a distraught postdoctoral fellow whose "presentation went terrible, all wrong dongles." In a pair of songs addressed to trees, "Oldest Oak at Brookside" and "Prayer for Ruby Elm," Samson imagines how human technological *progress* might appear to ancient trees. While these songs evoke the somewhat tired trope of a stationary object enduring massive changes around it, there is something reassuring about the steady survival of the object, despite adverse changes to its habitat, that might be read as hope for the continued survival of both humanity and the environment.

Samson's writing has often sought comfort in the tactile, as when the narrator in "Utilities" (*Reunion Tour*), for example, longs to be turned into an object: "I just wish I were a toothbrush or a solder gun. Make me something somebody can use." Randall Colburn writes in his review for the *A/V Club* that "*Winter Wheat* is about preservation and perseverance. . . . Samson's lyrics tend to linger on buildings, trees, and landmarks, things we can touch. Sometimes, we have to remember they're still there and that it's on us to ensure they'll continue to be there." Samson's songs addressed

to trees parallel the central growing metaphor embedded in the album's title: as plants manage to take root and survive in spite of adverse growing conditions, so too must humanity. On *Winter Wheat,* as Timothy Monger writes, "hope is hibernating just below the soil."

In "Oldest Oak at Brookside," which is sung to "the oldest oak tree in Winnipeg's Brookside Cemetery" (Chandler), the narrator traces backwards through history to the moment at which the oak was "set in sandy soil." With more than 200,000 graves, Brookside Cemetery, opened in 1876, is the largest civic cemetery in western Canada. The unnamed narrator speaks for settler Winnipeggers, alive and dead, using the pronoun "we" throughout the song in their address to the tree, whose growth has been fertilized by generations of their interred bones. Most lines in the song begin with the word "Before," and dig back through moments in Winnipeg's history both political and personal: "Before we built that smirking airport, before the phones told us where to go." Both opening images in this song give a troubled anthropomorphized autonomy to the non-human elements that they describe: the airport "smirking" and phones "tell[ing] us where to go." The airport that the narrator is describing is likely the new terminal that was added to the Winnipeg James Armstrong Richardson International Airport in 2011, which is semicircular. Seen from above, from the vantage point of an airplane, Samson's speaker imagines the terminal's curved shape as an unfriendly smirk rather than a welcoming smile. The terminal is Canada's first to be LEED-certified for its environmentally-friendly construction and operations, and the award-winning architect, César Pelli, "drew his inspiration from the vast prairies and sky" ("Winnipeg airport"). Samson's narrator reads a smug hypocrisy in the airport's environmental friendliness: while the building might be efficient, and its design evocative of the prairie fields it occupies, the effects of air travel are among the most environmentally disastrous. Much like Samson's previous critiques of the boastfulness of Winnipeg's welcome signs on the Trans-Canada Highway in the eponymous songs "One Great City!" (*Reconstruction Site*; see Malloy) and "Heart of the Continent" (*Provincial*), "Oldest Oak at Brookside" functions as a multi-layered indictment of a city that plasters a smile on its outward-facing elements, while glossing over the inequalities faced by its most vulnerable populations.

As "Oldest Oak at Brookside" progresses, the narrator wades deeper into Winnipeg's history, further stripping away the smirking mask erected by generations of the city's "Golden Business Boy[s]"[1] ("One Great City!").

In the second half of the song, Samson specifically criticizes Winnipeg's historical and present oppressions of Indigenous peoples: "Before the treaty, before we broke a promise to appear." Winnipeg is on Treaty 1 territory, the original lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. The second half of Samson's line, "before we broke a promise to appear," references the Manitoba Criminal Code, which gives police the discretion to release alleged offenders if they sign a "promise to appear" form (see Manitoba). Local and national governments have repeatedly made "a promise to appear" to address their numerous treaty violations, but have yet to make meaningful reparations. In a letter to journalist Erin Lebar, Samson explains that, "Especially since Idle No More," he has "been thinking of [himself] as a Treaty 1 writer. Thinking about the spirit and intent of the treaties has been a helpful way for [him] to reorient [his] citizenship . . . and try to find ways to express solidarity and support for Indigenous resistance." Writing against his frequent characterization as a poetic voice for all Winnipeg, in this song Samson weakens the authority of his singular, settler voice.

In the final lines of the song, the narrator of "Oldest Oak at Brookside" reaches back "[b]efore the treaty" to a time predating colonial invasion. Over swelling major chords and choral echoes, the narrator describes how the oak tree might have been planted, not by human hands, but by a series of natural processes: "You were lifted by a blue jay, beating wings above a sea, with a wave of grazing bison and tall grass prairie. You were set in sandy soil, and stand, a mighty oak." In these lines, the narrator engages in a fantasy of the natural, and seems to troublingly render the tree to be part of Terra Nullius. The problematic naivety of the narrator, however, which is buoyed by a musical arrangement that swells and resolves into major chords as they are describing an imagined past, is undercut by the lyrics that several voices sing in chorus. While the narrator waxes lyrical about the oak tree's genesis, their lyrics are interrupted by and layered with a choral refrain of partial phrases:

> Before we built that
> Before the fire
> Before the treaty
> Before we broke.

Like the narrator, the chorus uses the pronoun "we," but unlike the narrator, the chorus is actually plural, audibly comprised of several singing voices. The chorus peels back the rings of the ancient tree, not shying away from the atrocities the tree bore witness to but searching for the seeds of an

antecedent hope. While in "Winter Wheat" the narrator invites the listener to imagine the hope of a future harvest, in "Oldest Oak at Brookside," though the tree stands among thousands of graves, we see evidence of continued unlikely survival even amongst ruin.

Later on *Winter Wheat* in "Prayer for Ruby Elm," Samson borrows the repetitive structure of liturgical songs in order to offer a prayer for the implausible survival of an elm tree. Samson has frequently adopted and subverted the language and cadences of religious texts and music, ranging from the opening track of The Weakerthans' first album, "Illustrated Bible Stories for Children" (*Fallow*), to "Hymn of the Medical Oddity" on their final LP, *Reunion Tour*. "Prayer for Ruby Elm" is transcribed in Samson's album liner notes in enjambed lines rather than his customary prose paragraphs, which underscores the liturgical structure. Commissioned for Winnipeg filmmaker Erika MacPherson's 2013 film *May We Grow* and co-written with Christine Fellows, Samson's long-time life and creative partner, "Prayer for Ruby Elm" is both a prayer for a specific elm, and also a prayer for the continued survival of the environment, nature, and humanity.

Though the tree is facing a number of threats, first among them Dutch elm disease, "a very common problem in Winnipeg" (Samson to Chandler), the narrator has one central, humble request: "May it all seem plausible." Throughout the song, the narrator parallels the threats that the elm tree is facing with those that plague humanity. While some dangers, like "thunderstorm[s] . . . and climate change," are ominously realistic, at other moments, the tree is endowed with supernatural powers: In this song, the tree can not only produce oxygen, but the narrator prays that the leaves might "photosynthesize everything we're sorry for / into one long breath of air." The closing lines of the song also echo the weak, sapling hope for survival found in "Oldest Oak at Brookside" and "Winter Wheat": "Wherever we land," the narrator sings, encompassing seeds, birds, and humans all in one, "May we grow."

"Listing what's left": Remnants and Ledgers

Though much of *Winter Wheat* is focused on sowing the seeds for future growth, unlikely as it may be to come to fruition, nostalgia is also a constant presence. The nostalgia on this album is a troubled, late nostalgia, which juxtaposes a longing for "the good old days" with the firm, rooted knowledge that "the good old days were mostly bad," as the lyrics in the album's opening track suggest ("Select All Delete"). In keeping with the fundamentally

relational aesthetic of the "weaker-than," Samson's personae perform a nostalgia that both mourns the past and acknowledges that the present is not an inherently weaker era. "There is real danger in valourizing the past," Samson writes in an interview with *Noisey:* "There isn't anything to make great again (to unavoidably borrow from the bewildering moment we are living in) because it hasn't ever been that great and . . . there's something weirdly and abidingly hopeful there" (qtd. in Bayer). Samson borrows hope for the future from the past, not by idealizing days gone by, but by performing a painfully realistic recounting. For Samson, singing about the past fulfills twin desires; to mourn and elegize, and to celebrate and resituate nearly forgotten potential.

In order to make sense of their losses, many of Samson's nostalgic characters itemize their longing through the vehicle of lists of remnants or remains: personal effects from a lost time or love that string together complex narratives of absence. Samson's writing, which is highly paratactical, builds images of the speaker and absent auditor in reverse, blocking out the shape of loss like an X-ray, an accumulation of objects arranging around negative space. In the final lines of "History to the Defeated" (*Left and Leaving*), for example, the speaker takes stock of the effects left behind by a "Mechanic-school dropout" in order to build a shorthand understanding of the character, "listing what's left: a signed Slayer t-shirt, a car up on blocks in his mother's back yard." In "Everything Must Go!" (*Left and Leaving*), the narrator holds a yard sale in order to "pay [their] heart's outstanding bills," and lists items for sale ranging from "a cracked-up compass" to "a sense of wonder, only slightly used." In "Left and Leaving," the narrator explicitly identifies the items he is listing as mnemonic fragments, singing, "[m]emory will rust and erode into lists of all that you gave me: a blanket, some matches, this pain in my chest, the best parts of Lonely, duct tape and soldered wires, new words for old desires, and every birthday card I threw away." These lists act as both a final account—a tallying up of the remnants of a life or love that leaves material traces of itself behind—and an act of gathering, of taking stock not just of what was left behind, but of what is "left" to move forward with.

Though several songs on *Winter Wheat* centre on loss, elegizing individuals, the environment, and even a Public Access television station, each of their narrators finds a way to cling to hope. The narrator of "Fellow Traveller," for example, who is a fictionalized representation of British art critic and Soviet spy Anthony Blunt ("About John K. Samson's *Winter Wheat*"), mourns his loss of control over his disgraced public image ("Rain

for the last day that I will be known the way that I want them to know me"), and compares the loss to the defection of his erstwhile companion, the titular "Fellow Traveller." Though the narrator is now completely alone, abandoned by his government, co-conspirators, and even his dreams, and though memories of his partner are increasingly blurred (by "rain," "tears," and time), by the conclusion of the song the speaker "still believe[s] in you and me." "Fellow Traveller" resituates a historically *weak* narrative—a queer love story between two disgraced Communist-sympathizing double agents—as a sympathetic, deeply human tale of staunchly enduring loyalty and companionship. Though "Fellow Traveller" is unique within *Winter Wheat* for its physical and historical settings, its story of lonely, unlikely, left-leaning solidarity in the face of ongoing loss places it in clear thematic concert with the rest of Samson's work.

Returning to Manitoba, the song "Requests," commissioned for Erika MacPherson's 2018 film *Heimþrá, In Thrall to Home,* is comprised of accumulative requests from a woman to her deceased female ancestors for transhistorical, reciprocal forgiveness. The speaker is thus gendered female in this song. There is a tragic latency to these requests, an unfulfilled yearning that circles back upon itself in the bookended lyric of the opening and closing line: "I want you to know what I forgive you for, now that you're all ashes anyway." Like many of the requests in the song, the speaker's opening entreaty switches suddenly between the registers of grand narratives of human existence (death, forgiveness, and family) and the quotidian, embodied realities of life and death ("now that you're all ashes anyway"). The mixed tonalities of this song resemble the reality of experiencing the death of a loved one; it is both an earth-shaking, cosmic shift in reality, and the most ordinary event in the world. The speaker's final "anyway," offhandedly tagged on at the end of a line jam-packed with affect, undercuts the gravity of her request with its conversational tone. The speaker is both insistent upon being heard by the auditor and self-conscious about the whole interaction, beginning and ending with a trailed off "anyway" that suggests she may be resigned to many of her requests going unfulfilled.

Though the speaker's requests, which range from wanting the auditor to "hear the farm apologize for letting you believe you could return" to wanting "every highway sign to remember we were here," are largely untenable, Samson situates hope for salvation, or at least something approaching forgiveness, in the very utterance of a request. In its explicit voicing of frustrated entreaties, "Requests" resembles the opening line of "(manifest),"

the first song in the sonnet cycle that structures The Weakerthans' 2003 album *Reconstruction Site:* "I want to call requests through heating vents, / and hear them answered with a whisper, 'No.'" Like the whispered denial in "(manifest)," the speaker of "Requests" voices her requests to an absent or invisible auditor with not only the fear, but the intention of being denied. While the auditor can no longer hear or feel forgiveness, the speaker's performance of absolution locates forgiveness in the voicing of her song: though the intended auditor may either deny or not hear the request, we, the listeners, bear witness. Like the ashes the speaker scatters in the second line ("Every step into the river pushes you further away"), the speaker clutches at the remnants of the auditor even as she watches them disperse, singing, "I want you to take your time to disappear." In "Requests," the speaker performs one of the most enduring forms of elegy: singing her mother's memory into lyric so that the listener might share in her remembrance. Delivered over a splashy, gently tick-tocking beat and sparsely plucked guitar, this song sounds memory, delaying the auditor's disappearance "in 4/4 time" ("Left and Leaving").

"Let it rest and be done": Weak Listening

Long-time listeners of The Weakerthans will recognize another pair of songs on *Winter Wheat* as a kind of meta-elegy, completing a much-loved tetralogy of tracks about a "Cat Named Virtute." The first two songs in the series, "Plea From a Cat Named Virtute" (*Reconstruction Site*) and "Virtute the Cat Explains Her Departure" (*Reunion Tour*), offer a cat's perspective on her owner's spiralling mental illness and addiction. "Virtute," which Samson translates to "strength" from Latin, emerges from one of Winnipeg's first city mottos, "Unum Cum Virtute Multorum," or, "One with the Strength of Many." In her first song, Virtute tries to convince her owner that he is stronger than he thinks: "Listen, about those bitter songs you sing? They're not helping anything. They won't make you strong." Virtute insists that her owner find connection with other humans in order to gain "the strength of many." Like many of Samson's songs that dramatize failures of communication, however, Virtute's auditor is unable to understand her pleas or access her language of assurance.

In Virtute's second song, when she "Explains her Departure," she and her owner have lost all ability to communicate. Having strayed too far from home, Virtute first loses her memory of the way home, and, eventually, her memory of her own name: "For a while I heard you missing steps in

the street, and your anger, pleading in an uncertain key, singing the sound that you found for me . . . but I can't remember the sound that you found for me." In "Plea," Virtute begs her owner to "Listen." In "Departure," though Virtute can *hear* her owner "for a while," she slowly loses her ability to locate meaning in human sounds, the song dramatizing Virtute's dislocation through auditory imagery that weakly sounds "in an uncertain key." "Virtute the Cat Explains Her Departure" is less of an explanation, and more of a lament for the final fracture in communication between Virtute and her owner. Going beyond the obvious interspecies communication incompatibility, the Virtute tetralogy can be read as an extended meditation on the importance of learning to listen, even or especially when the voice is *weaker* than your own.

The first evocation of Virtute on *Winter Wheat* is oblique, coming midway through the track "17th Street Treatment Centre," in which the narrator cheerfully details the twenty-first day of his stay at an in-patient facility. It is unclear whether this is the narrator's last day in treatment or simply a day that feels like a turning point, but "on the twenty-first day," the narrator lists the ways in which he is reclaiming some fragile hope: "The sun didn't hate me, the food wasn't angry, the bed didn't sigh, the ceiling said it's possible I might get my looks back." Though the speaker is feeling stronger, his outlook is still coded in the languages of addiction, displacing blame for the side effects of his withdrawal (light sensitivity, queasiness, restlessness, insomnia, and doubt) onto anthropomorphized objects around him.

From his tentatively hopeful mindset three weeks into the program, the narrator is able to reframe his "court-ordered stay," finding positives and even humour where before he found none: "On the twenty-first day, I danced to the twelve-step, examined, admitted I'm powerless to . . ." Using the phraseology of the twelve-step program, the narrator sings his way to a tenuously hopeful, if incomplete admission: While he is powerless over any word placed at the end of his sentence, he locates a new resilience in its very vocalization. In the classic twelve-step program, admitting that you are powerless over your addictions is the first step to regaining power over one's own life. In step with Samson's politics and poetics of weakness, hope for the future in "17th Street Treatment Centre" can be found in the narrator's reclamation of his own powerlessness. The song concludes with a similarly "hopelessly hopeful" ("Exiles Among You," *Left and Leaving*) statement: "In for three weeks, or in for forever. . . . Most of us probably not getting better, but not getting better together." Finding community in even the bleakest of

locales, the song's narrator locates transformative hope in shaky, situational companionship. Directly following the narrator's admission that he is "powerless," he describes how he passes time in the treatment centre: "Sang the one about the spring the cat ran away." In this moment, the keen listener will identify the narrator as, for the first time in Samson's cat-song catalogue, Virtute's owner. Though the cat has long since died, the echo of Virtute's songs seems to form the soundtrack of his recovery.

In "Virtute at Rest," the final track on *Winter Wheat*, we hear from a spectral version of Virtute. The song opens by situating Virtute's voice within her owner's mind: "Now that the treatment and anti-depressants and seven months sober have built me a bed in the back of your brain." Though this song again dramatizes Virtute speaking entreatingly to her silent owner, for the first time there is an underlying assurance that her owner can *hear* her. Singing from directly within her owner's mind, Virtute echoes some of the larger issues of the album—forgiveness, mental health, rehabilitation, and attenuated companionship—and invites (rather than pleads with) her owner to "Let it rest—all you can't change. Let it rest and be done." Though, Virtute warns, "it will never be easy or simple . . . [and] I will dig in my claws when you stray"—the "when" rather than "if" and owner-cat-inversion of "stray" weakening any sense that the song is absolving the subject of responsibility—there is weak hope in Virtute's gentle insistence that her owner transform his indulgent inaction into generative *rest*. In *Winter Wheat*'s gentle, cozy closing track, Samson allows this sprawling, anxious album to come to rest, turning inwards once again. As Virtute and her owner finally find one another in the realm of the imagination, resting together "like we used to, in a line of late-afternoon sun," their voices cohere into one; singing the sounds that they found for each other in a melancholy, late, and weak chorus of hope. As the listener lays the *Winter Wheat* to rest, we are invited to join the chorus, by continuing to sing the sounds that we have found in its tracks, tuning ourselves carefully and attentively to one another.

"A way to survive": Beginnings

In the epigraph to *Winter Wheat*, Samson quotes visual artist Jenny Holzer's 1994 aluminum plaque, which reads, "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy." Holzer's piece, which resembles a heavy memorial plaque but is formed out of a weak metal alloy, contrasts the sharpness of uncertain survival with a flimsy, untrustworthy dream of joy. Holzer's plaque evokes a simultaneous hope for the future—"a dream" and

"joy"—with the late, backward-facing grief of an epitaph. For Samson to use Holzer's tentatively hopeful epitaph as an epigraph to *Winter Wheat* suggests a similar tension between the memorialization of a troubled past and a theoretical, dream-like hope for the future. Like Ngai and Berlant, Samson wrestles with the complicated, occasionally *ugly* or *cruel* feelings that can attend hopefulness—is it possible, or even ethical, to cling to hope anymore? In uncoupling hope from sources of oppressive power, the *weak hope* I hear in Samson's lyrics imagines a collective chorus that tunes itself into metaphorical harmony primarily through radically equitable *listening*—becoming "One with the strength of many" not through forced cohesion or the erasure of difference, but by the loudest voices quieting themselves in order to listen to the *weakerthan*. *Winter Wheat* offers no blithe assurances, but instead begins to model the weak hope of attentive, empathetic *listening*, inviting listeners to tune our own ears towards the tiny lengthenings of light that just might be somewhere out in the winter wheat.

NOTES

1 The "Golden Boy" statue in Winnipeg becomes an image of corporate greed and hypocrisy in "One Great City!"

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